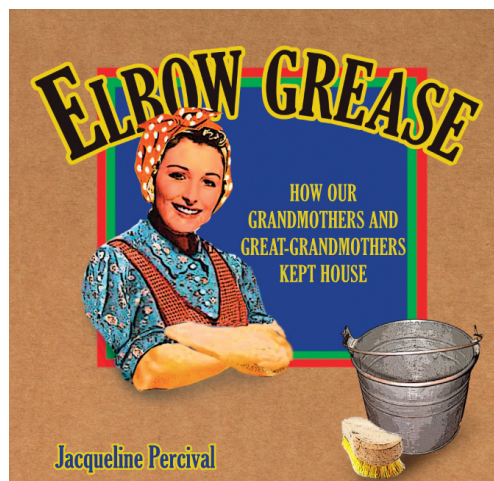


## AN INTERVIEW WITH JACQUELINE PERCIVAL AUTHOR OF *ELBOW GREASE*

### What prompted your interest in collecting household advice books?

I found the first book (*The Book of Hints and Wrinkles*) in a junk shop across the road from our house. I was just married, fairly useless at housekeeping after years of living in bedsits and other people's houses in varying states of ascetic squalor, and was ordering lots of feminist books for the bookshop I was then working in. This was in the late 1970s, and over the next 25 years I gradually amassed the collection that now spreads all around the house and fills a ridiculous amount of space. I have magazines, housekeeping advice books, cookery books, guides for servants, guides for women in colonial India, part-works, sets of encyclopedias, medical guides, gardening books, how-to-do-the-laundry books, needlework books, school textbooks, books for middle-, upper- and lower middle-class women, and even a book on charm and how to be charming, written in the 1930s and with the most amazing photos. I also have lots of duplicates as I can't bear the thought of them being thrown away if I don't buy them.



### Did you collect them with the aim of writing about them?

I bought the first one because it was genuinely useful and also hilarious - doing housework for 14 hours a day every day struck me as funny in those days. Hardly any of the feminist books I was reading mentioned middle-class women: at that point the focus was almost 100 percent on working-class women and their experiences and lives, and although I found it very interesting I did wonder when someone would start to redress the balance and publish a few books about middle-class housewives. In those days the idea of housework and housewives was only just beginning to be studied seriously by American feminists like Susan Strasser and Dolores Hayden, and it seemed a long time before British writers such as Pamela Horn and Deirdre Beddoe began to write about British women at home. I was an Open University student in the late 1990s and I chose housekeeping advice books as the subject of a long essay. My tutor encouraged me to dig further into what seemed to be a niche area but it was only some years after that, when helping a PhD student with a bit of research, that I decided to actually Get On With It.

### How do you track down books for your collection: internet, charity shops?

Most of my books came from junk shops at first. I found one holding up a sideboard and the shop owner let me have the book for nothing, asking only what I wanted that scruffy old thing for; several people sent me books after I appeared on the Channel 4 programme *Collector's Lot*; friends and family gave me books; Robert at Adelphi Books in Southsea puts interesting titles aside for me; I sometimes find new acquisitions at charity shops; and I bought a lot from Fortune Green Books and Liz Seeber.

### **What do you think is the most interesting era of advice books?**

My favourite era is the period ten years each side of the Great War, and also from the 1930s up to the end of the 1950s. After that it's too close to memory, and although I have several Victorian books I don't find them as interesting as the twentieth century ones. The early twentieth century has an innocence and a simplicity that appeals to me: there's a sense of homemaking and endeavour, of 'wifie, hubby and kiddies' that's both cosy and a bit stifling - it seemed to peter out in the 1930s.

### **Why is it that Mrs Beeton seems to be the only name that we're familiar with today?**

Mention Mrs Beeton and even though people may not know anything about her books they'll almost certainly know her name: generations of women received them as wedding gifts and learned to cook and keep house with them. Having a 'Mrs Beeton' in the house almost certainly meant that any domestic problem, recipe or social dilemma could be instantly sorted out. However, other writers were just as prolific and just as authoritative, including Mrs Peel, Florence Jack and the great Elizabeth Craig, and so I tend to look out for their books rather than those from the 'Mrs Beeton' label, although I do wonder sometimes who actually wrote the books after she died...

### **How did you come to write your first book, *Breadcrumbs and Banana Skins*?**

I've always been interested in thrift. My mother used to freak out when we got the soap wet at bathtime and it wasn't until I came across a list of hints that included keeping soap dry that it all clicked into place. I'd been playing around with various ideas and formats for about 10 years before I actually got started, so once I decided on the subject it only took about six months to get it written. I write lots of notes, keep a big database of book titles and topics and am shameless about scrounging books off friends and family, as well as having the sort of memory that can recall a page of text. I wanted to show that thrift didn't just surface out of nowhere during World War Two, as a couple of recent books have claimed: rather the need for thrift and frugality seems to have been ingrained and careful housewives found that their skills came to the fore during times of privation. The Great War seems to be the point at which thrift became a nationwide preoccupation: food and fuel shortages forced everyone into the sort of economies that were relatively easy to put in place during World War Two.

### **When researching *Elbow Grease*, did you find out things that surprised you?**

*Elbow Grease* made me very aware of the actual slog involved in housework. My grandmother had a washing copper and a dolly peg, no hot water and no inside toilet, and my parents and I lived with her for a while just after I was born. My father was an engine driver and she would have washed his dirty overalls, perhaps in paraffin as some books recommend - reading about washday in the days before electricity really made me think about how hard it would have been for her and her neighbours and every woman who kept a house clean all across the country. The chapter on pests was also a bit of an eye-opener...

### **Have you ever used any of the hints in these books yourself?**

Some of the hints (and recipes) are a bit off-base and I can't imagine anyone, unless they were making a documentary or a *Victorian Kitchen*-type TV programme, wanting to use them. Mercury and phosphorus are toxic yet several books advised using them around the house (presumably people were more careful around poisons then) while some of the cleaning ideas are clearly aimed at keeping the servant's noses firmly to the grindstone. Having said that, I have used a clock oil recommended in a 1940s advice book, and a couple of friends have reported success with the shoe repairs section in *Breadcrumbs and Banana Skins*. I've always kept a button box and scrap bag; I grate up stale bread, and keep a jug by the sink to fill up with water that would otherwise have gone down the sink.

### **There's been a surge of interest in household management recently in terms of TV programmes - is this because we're losing the 'old skills'?**

I think that in many cases we've already lost many of our 'old skills'. Family life seems to be fragmenting and women no longer seem to be holding it together as they used to do: many women seem to have stopped cooking, baking and doing craft-work. I'm aware that my feminist ideas don't sit well with this aspect of life, but my own experience tells me that I had a stable upbringing partly because my mother was home when we came home from school, and my grandmothers kept house along thrifty lines and produced all manner of lovely treats - from dandelion wine strong enough to blow your head off, to plum pie and rabbit stew. Household management is more than sticking a ready meal in the microwave and spraying an air freshener around a room. It needs care and a bit of love, and this is perhaps what the current crop of TV programmes are aiming at.

### **You're also a book dealer. What kind of books do you sell and how do you sell them?**

I started selling books after my father died. He had a huge library of railway books and I started selling them on the internet along with some of mine. I describe my inventory as being anything but sport and militaria, and I've also thinned it down a lot lately, so it's mostly history, biographies, books about Hampshire (Portsmouth, Gosport and the local area), women's studies, hard-to-find fiction, children's fiction, craft books (especially quilt books), and anything else that I like the look of.

### **Do you have a regular writing routine? At the kitchen table, or on the computer?**

I am not the world's most organised writer. I juggle it with the book-selling and with a casual job as a library assistant, plus my husband's self-employment and son's part-time job. My desk space, where I type directly onto the computer, is crowded with books, computer and work-in-progress, barricaded against my cat who likes to sleep on the keyboard. I work in what Starhawk called the RPJ method - random piles of junk. My intentions are wonderful but the space is minimal, so I just do the best I can.

### **What's your next research project?**

I want to do some more work on invalid cookery and leftovers, both of which I researched for *Breadcrumbs*: some of the invalid recipes are vile. I'm thinking about a collaboration with a friend who celebrates seasonal events and who lives thriftily, as I do. I also want to research the lives of some of the writers whose books I've read and enjoyed for years, especially Matilda Lees-Dods, Mrs Peel, Florence Jack and Elizabeth Fairclough. They were all groundbreakers in various ways and the fact that they are elusive with regards to photographs and biographical details spurs me on to find them. Other areas of future research include homemaking in the late 1940s-1950s, an area which despite Austerity produced some of the most manic advice books and cookery books ever published in the UK, and the connections between domestic life and popular fiction written by and for women. I've been collecting books by women writers with a specific domestic slant for some time now and I'm especially interested in the way writers such as O Douglas approached the concept of retrenching - the sudden drop in income experienced by the formerly affluent middle classes after the Great War.

**YOU CAN BUY *ELBOW GREASE* BY JACQUELINE PERCIVAL FROM ANY GOOD BOOKSHOP, MAJOR INTERNET RETAILERS INCLUDING AMAZON, OR DIRECT FROM THE PUBLISHERS [www.chaplinbooks.co.uk](http://www.chaplinbooks.co.uk)**