

Did I let between

The designer turned
novelist tells how real
life has inspired her
first foray into fiction

BELLA POLLEN, once an internationally known fashion designer trading under the name Arabella Polien, has just published her first novel, *All About Men*. This spoof on the rag trade has thrust her back into the limelight 16 years after she created short snappy suits for Princess Diana. With no formal training, Bella persuaded millionaire Naim Attallah to back her young business, leading to eight nominations for major awards before Courtauld Textiles swallowed her company up.

We meet in her grand Victorian house in Notting Hill Gate, West London. With tumbling blonde hair and piercing blue eyes, she is pretty, skinny — and natural in jeans, bare feet and clean face.

Bella speaks in a trendy Americanised way — she says she *hangs*, which means she hangs around, and when the phone rings she can't *do chat* — but hers is a perfectly enunciated wireless kind of voice.

When her business collapsed four years ago, she was approached to do various fashion collections. But the only interview she attended was for a job to run a porn channel for Playboy. "I thought



**The
Caroline
Phillips**

Interview

Bella Pollen
AUTHOR

it would be hysterical," she says. "I'd have made it like Seventies Playboy — very kitsch with lots of good feminist writers on it — with Gloria Steinem followed by nudie girls frolicking."

Bella, now 36, didn't get the job. "All they really wanted was someone to front the girly stuff and they were totally horrified when they saw me, wheeling myself in nine months pregnant."

Instead she sat down and started to write. *All About Men*, printed in a range of groovy typefaces and with curious modern punctuation (people speak with dashes, as in — Do you see what I mean?) is a stitch-up of the fashion industry interwoven with the love tumbles of Deli Madison, its fashion designer protagonist who is a gutsy, self-obsessed young woman.

Is Deli based on Bella? "Yes," she laughs. "On my selfish side." And is it Martin Taylor, erstwhile chief executive of Courtauld Textiles and now financial guru to the Labour Party, who emerges as Grant Teflon, the oily, vain company chairman? "No, no. I just Magimixed certain plonky executive types." And did Bella, as the book relates, hide a packet of crisps between her thighs in Latin class, allowing the teacher to help himself to one? Or "study maths, Spanish, boys and drugs but not necessarily in that order"? Or "spend an entire summer shoplifting"? "Yes, yes, yes."

Then there is the love interest. "I have a penchant for ugly, hairy men," Bella admitted once. So what of the affairs in the book? "I made them up." She laughs. "I didn't even have a proper boyfriend between marriages, just a few flings."

And was it published because her husband, the Hon David Macmillan, a grandson of Harold Macmillan, is a part-owner of Macmillan books? "David just said to the editor: 'If you want to publish what you see as a good commercial book, you shouldn't turn it down because it's written by my wife.'" (They met four years ago on a blind date. "He was

teacher take a crisp from my thighs? Yes! Yes! Yes!



PHOTOGRAPHS BY TIM CLARKE



LITERARY AIDE: Bella and her husband, the Hon David Macmillan

TELLING TALES: Bella's 'grotesquely funny' novel set in the rag trade is part-autobiography

a manic, funny, scrawny person with black hair who drank lots of Coca-Cola.")

Now Bella is half-way through writing her second novel. But she is also 10 weeks pregnant with her fourth child, her second by David. The elder two are from her first marriage to Italian art dealer Giacomo Algranti. "I've only ever got married when I'm pregnant. I always have shotgun weddings."

So why such a big production line? Only Victorian women and historical peasants, she reckons, deal in this sort of volume. "The idea of four scares me. I prefer to say I have two sets of two. I didn't plan any more," she admits. "I already have three British lads who swagger round the house in their Y-fronts calling me 'babe'. The oldest is 11. I'm quite bad at being a mother. I'm impatient and not good at making fairy cakes. And I hate being pregnant. It turns my brain to mayonnaise and I look and feel dreadful. I want to cut the throats of all those women who say it's the happiest time of their lives."

Such feelings are exacerbated by her insomnia. "I have a terror of not sleeping," she says. "One scary bout lasted for four years when my business was out of control and I was a single mother, divorcing, with two small children. I took endless pills and nothing worked. I slept for three hours a night. It got better as soon as I stopped the business. But you're left with the legacy. Just as actresses are left with a fear of food."

When she does sleep, she suffers Dali-esque nightmares. She says she's "irritatingly positive" during the days. Certainly she is vibrant, bright, funny and natural. "So I suppose I work out my problems at night."

Bella spent the first 11 years of her life in New York, then returned here to be educated. "I hated

England because it was so different." She was unhappy at school and thinks she attended "three or four" establishments. "Aged 13, at Hatherop, I had a disagreement with one of the masters when he said something about my dad and I slapped him in the face." Her paternal aunt, Pandora Moorehead, was the headmistress and expelled her.

THEN she contracted Osgood-Schlatter's disease, from which she suffers still. Victims become hyper-extended, as if chronically double-jointed. At 14, she spent six months with both legs in plaster from ankle to hip. Unable to do the sports she loved, she became determined to succeed.

We return to the subject of her book. Her portrayal of the fashion industry is grotesquely funny. "The business is all lies. You're hyped to have this fantastic business when in fact you have only one customer."

She says now: "It's a world that's so fast that, once you become embroiled in it, it's almost impossible to see a way out. If you're as obsessive as I am, you're soon working 24-hour days, seven days a week. Certainly my first marriage failed partly because of it. Being a female in the fashion business is tough, you can't do family and work."

But she bears no grudges. "People want me to feel bitter and twisted. I felt incredibly angry for about a week. But it's a fait accompli."

If she hadn't turned to writing, she would have opened a soda fountain bar, dressed in a pink nylon overall and made disgusting cocktails all day. So what would she like as her epitaph? "She knew not fact from fiction," Bella answers instantly. "But that's because I'm such a brilliant liar..."