

Me and my... milliner

MARGARET MACINTYRE McCLYMONT, 62, RETIRED TEACHER

ANA MARIA ORTEGA, 49, MILLINER

I FIRST met Ana Maria by sheer chance. My son got married in 2006 and I had bought the outfit, shoes and bag but I couldn't see the hat to match. I was with my sister in Tenerife and found a shop with some fascinators to die for. I thought, "That would go beautifully with my outfit," not having a shred of the garment with me and carrying the colour in my head. Unfortunately, once I got home, it didn't match, so I tried to find someone who would dye it and was pointed in the direction of Ana Maria.

When we met she took a look and said: "I think you should cut your losses and let me create a new hat for you." She showed me a few sample shapes and said: "If you are willing to trust me, leave it with me." I have to say I was bowled over with the finished design.

She made me a pale grey/blue hat, almost like a pillbox-style. If you imagine a helter skelter but flattened to the side of my head, that's the idea. It was so comfortable.

My husband Alasdair died in 2001 and I met Jimmy, who was also widowed, at the end of 2006. We felt we were too old to live in sin and decided to get married last summer. I knew Ana Maria was a fantastic dressmaker, too, and asked her to make my entire wedding outfit. I told her: "You know me well enough. I don't want to look silly, but I want to look as if I'm getting married."

I had an idea in my mind's eye but was open to suggestion. For the hat, Ana Maria started out with one style but as soon as she saw it on my head said: "I don't think this is for you, the dress is too delicate." She spent hours working on it before she was totally satisfied. The finished hat was beautiful and picked up the theme of the dress, with net and lots of feathers on it. She knew what would work for me and was spot on.

Ana Maria is a very caring person and I like her a lot. There is a bond between us and it's more than her being someone I can ask to make a hat or an outfit. There is a friendship there. I helped her move house on one occasion. She also stayed at my house when she was between houses for a few days. We have become good friends.

I HAVE loved hats since I was a little girl but in Mexico, where I'm from, we don't wear hats. It's a cultural thing, where hats are only worn by those working in the countryside, but not where I grew up just outside Mexico City. When I moved to Scotland 15 years ago I found out about a course in millinery. I already had a degree in interior and industrial design but wanted to change direction.

I have always been good at making things with my hands having learned dressmaking at an early age from my mother. Although I love dressmaking, in millinery I have found my true passion. People often undervalue how great hats can be. You can already look fantastic but a hat will just top it off.

I first got to know Margaret five years ago. Although Margaret knows what she likes and what suits her, she wasn't sure how to put it together so when she came to me we sat down and worked it out. From that occasion, when I designed a hat for her son's wedding, we got on very well and kept in touch.

I usually sit down with a customer and try to find out a bit more about them so I can match the style of their hat to their personality. Some people like hats which are outrageous, flamboyant or eccentric but Margaret is quite conservative and, most importantly, likes to look smart.

When she asked me to design her wedding outfit I was so touched. We chose a pale gold because it was her second wedding – I didn't want to suggest cream, ivory or white. I was invited to the wedding and it was wonderful to see her. Margaret looked very beautiful.

These days we often go for a coffee and out for dinner. I have built up a lovely relationship with Margaret and we have become close. She is very special to me.

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Interviews by Susan Swarbrick
Photograph by Jim Galloway

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How correcting a fashion faux pas provided the unlikely starting point for a friendship. Hats off to them

Fiona Gibson

NOW I know how it feels to be Changing Room Boyfriend. You know, that bored, impatient-looking male who waits outside the changing room for what feels like 17 weeks while his girlfriend tries things on. Only I'm not the boyfriend, obviously. I am the mother accompanying my daughter on her first proper shopping trip for clothes.

As she's nearly 10, I realise we've been incredibly lucky. Friends with an older child have supplied us with years-worth of beautiful hand-me-downs. Recently, though, daughter has discovered that not only is it possible to buy new clothes from shops, but to try them on first. We have also brought daughter's friend.

The girls amass piles of Primark clothing and disappear into the changing rooms. I loiter outside, watching their feet beneath the curtains as rejected garments tumble to the floor. I wait and I wait, sensing fresh wrinkles forming on my face. To pass the time, I text a friend who's at boot camp right now. "It's tough," she texts back. "Up at five. Non-stop exercise. Dinner a sliver of chicken and two carrots." This takes my mind off the waiting as I try to imagine performing stomach crunches during what is effectively night time.

Then impatience creeps back in. At least Changing Room Boyfriends have other CRBs to chat to – or, if they don't have the wherewithal to talk, they can roll their eyes at each other. I try to exchange a knowing grin with the young lad who's manning the changing rooms, but worry he'll think I'm some prowly cougar-type.

By the time the girls emerge, I have aged at least a decade. I know this because I glimpse myself in a cruelly positioned vast mirror. My skin is sallow and grey bags lurk beneath my droopy eyes. I should probably head straight for the undertaker's but my young charges are marching onwards: destination Claire's Accessories.

Here they examine hair accessories for as long as it takes to watch a full-length movie. My body develops the beginnings of a stoop. This hair bobble or that one? Legwarmers in fluorescent orange or pink? I don't know – I thought legwarmers went out with Bruno from Fame.

I hobble after the girls as they swan out of Claire's towards Lush. Here, in around 40 minutes, they manage to narrow down their choice of bath bomb to 16 varieties. I poke a finger into some kind of shower jelly and fiddle with my phone like a teenager.

Boot-camp friend texts: "DYING OF HUNGER WANT TO CRY". Suddenly, I feel better. Most people buy a new outfit for a party. My pal aims to shed half a stone in a week. Apparently, Kerry Katona didn't last the week at this camp: she stormed out, tearful, on day two.

And here I am, out in the city with a belly-full of pizza and two nine-year olds who are thrilled by £2 T-shirts and bath bombs. "Blue or yellow?" my daughter asks. "Oh, definitely the yellow," I enthuse.



Secret Son by Laila Lalami is published in Viking paperback, priced £12.99

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PICTURE STORIES

Laila Lalami
Author



MY love affair with English began when I was 15. Like many Moroccan teenagers, I found the language to be less mysterious than I expected, thanks to British bands we listened to, but there was so much about it that still seemed completely exotic. Our textbook featured a woman named Stella, who was always looking for her umbrella and making statements that ended "isn't it?"

I decided to study English literature at university in Rabat. But finding English-language books proved somewhat difficult, until I came across the aptly named English Bookshop on Zankat al-Yamama.

The store was set up in a converted garage, with floor-to-ceiling shelves and a few rolling carts.

The books were not always ordered in a sensible way – you

might find a shelf of books by Graham Greene right next to a shelf full of feminist classics – but that made it possible to discover new things all the time. I remember the hours spent there, looking for something I could read in my new, halting language.

I went back to Rabat last summer for a visit and was amazed that nothing had changed at the old English Bookshop.

The owner was there, a trim

gentleman with thick eyeglasses and now greying hair. He showed me that he carried my novel, in several editions, in various conditions and at different prices.

I would never have imagined that some day my books would be sold there – not just because the idea of being published was so remote, but also because I was not even writing fiction in English yet.

The sensory experience of being in a bookstore – browsing the shelves,