

Books

Denise O'Leary talks to Kit Berry about her Cornish inspiration for the world of Stonewylde

Walk in labyrinth leads to new life

IT READS like a scene from a novel: A single mother of three sons who is at a low ebb, overweight and disillusioned with her job as a teacher is sent on a course and in a pivotal moment is filled with the conviction that her life is about to be transformed for the better.

This, however, is no fiction, but is precisely what happened to Kit Berry when, at the age of 45, she found herself exploring the labyrinth in the grounds of Dartington Hall in South Devon.

"I can only describe it as an epiphany," she says. "In a labyrinth the pathways follow an ancient pattern which helps to focus your mind. I'm not usually very good at meditation because my mind tends to wander off, but this really worked for me and in that moment I knew I was going to lose the weight and write the book I had been thinking about for years, and that it would be successful."

Within days Kit had begun work on the Stonewylde series. Three books have already been published; a fourth is now complete, and will appear as soon as the fifth is finished.

The books have a huge cult following, loyal fans who have become so captivated by the world Kit has translated from her imagination on to the pages of her books that they speak of having been "Stonewylded". The promise is that "once you have entered the world of Stonewylde you will never be the same again".

In America Kit was recently named fourth in a list of authors most likely to succeed J K Rowling. There have even been approaches from a film company.

And on a personal level Kit did indeed lose her weight. "The day before the moment in the labyrinth the people on the course, which I had been sent on by the school where I was teaching in Weymouth, had to walk up on Dartmoor, and I was really struggling to keep up. But when I started writing I started to slim," she recalled.

"I would go for long walks in the countryside to gather my thoughts and then I would come back and write, so I wasn't sitting on the sofa in front of the TV eating crisps, and I lost about five and a half stone."

Now she is so fit that she regularly runs, and the transformation of her life was complete when a friend introduced her to an IT specialist called Martin who helped her prepare her book for the printers. They fell in love and married last December.

Kit has now given up teaching to concentrate full time on finishing and promoting her books. She describes



writing in a "white-hot heat, a frenzy of flying fingers", saying that it "just poured out of me like a torrent". It took just four months to complete the draft of a massive book which she decided to break down into three separate volumes - *Magus of Stonewylde*, *Moondance of Stonewylde* and *Solstice at Stonewylde*.

The stories centre on a mysterious alternative community tucked away in the Dorset countryside where living is in harmony with nature and ancient rituals are observed. Most of those who live there never venture outside and live simply without the modern intrusion of the Internet, TV or telephones.

But the ruling Hallfolk, led by the charismatic Magus, have more freedom, and it is when one of them introduces a young girl whose life has been blighted by allergies caused by her 21st century lifestyle that the story begins to unfold.

'You soon discover that writing is the easy bit'

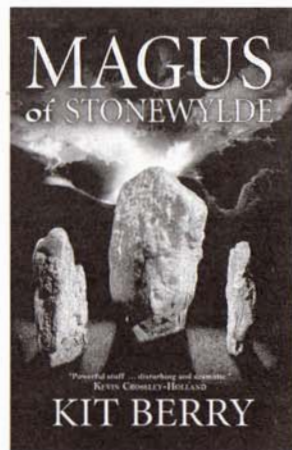
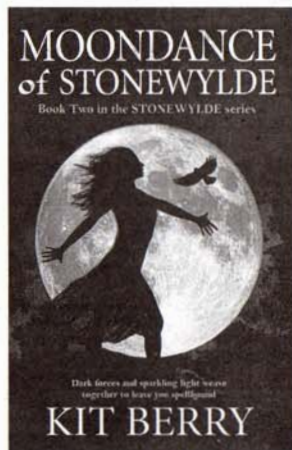
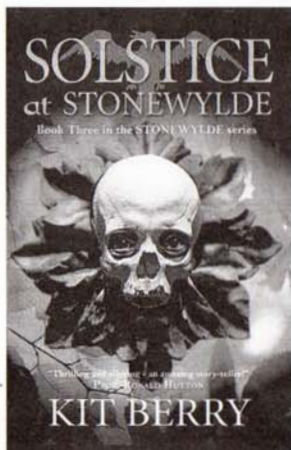
Berry is Kit's maiden name, part of her Cornish heritage. She based the Hall at Stonewylde on a blend of Lanhydrock House at Bodmin - where her great-grandfather was once the local policeman - and another large house near St Studly where she worked as a nanny. Her family originate from Illogan and her grandfather was an apprentice pharmacist in Bodmin, where her great aunts worked as dressmakers.

She lived in Cornwall when she married but when she and her husband separated she moved to Dorset with her three boys, doing a series of menial jobs while she trained as a teacher.

Passionate about nature, she believes that we have lost touch with the unexplained natural energy and forces our ancestors were in tune with - and it is this kind of world that she has



Kit at the ancient stone circles at Avebury, where she often goes. Top left - Kit and husband Martin; they met when he helped prepare her book for printing



endeavoured to recreate in the Stonewylde series.

Having completed her books, it was a huge challenge to penetrate the world of publishing and she was hindered by the fact that her books don't fall into any pre-defined category. "If I knew then what I know now I probably wouldn't have started, because you soon discover that writing is the easy bit," she said.

"I hate referring to them as 'fantasy novels' because that suggests giant goblins running around with swords and I wouldn't be interested in reading that kind of thing.

"I found an agent who really believed in my work and she sent it off expectantly to all the publishers, but one by one we got a rejection. It was she who suggested that I self-publish and she invested a whole year of her life in me, taking me through the editing process and helping me find someone to design my book sleeve."

Remortgaging her home to fund the publication, Kit then doggedly pestered the major distributors and bookshops until they would start selling her books. This led to more problems as they wanted to place them in the teenage

section and, as she discovered, her fans cover a wide age spectrum with plenty of interest from more mature readers who can nostalgically relate to the traditional way of life they portray.

The popularity of the books is now, however, gaining momentum with a growing interest in the world of Stonewylde - a world that started to come to life when Kit Berry began to believe she could achieve her dream.

Details of where to buy the books, which retail at between £3.95 and £5.99, can be found on www.stonewylde.com