

Suffolk writer's radio show returns for third season

Jan Etherington's award-winning *Conversations From A Long Marriage* is back this month. By **Danielle Lett**

Relecting from her Walberswick home, life as of late hasn't been too bad for writer and journalist Jan Etherington, all things considered.

"We've pretty much been carrying on as normal, and life as a writer wasn't altered too much," she explains.

Jan resides in the county with her husband Gavin Petrie and their dog Jagger. Since moving here in 2013, she's fallen in love with Suffolk.

"We moved here that January during a bad winter – as we drove into Suffolk it was snowing and we thought 'what have we done?', but we quickly realised it was paradise and we absolutely love it here.

"We're in a village that's very creative – think lots of writers, actors and directors. It's a lovely place to be."

It could be argued that moving to Suffolk has provided Jan with the much-needed tranquillity and headspace needed to write some of her best works – including the beloved *Conversations From A Long Marriage* which is about to premiere its third season.

Conversations From A Long Marriage is a radio show that stars Dame Joanna Lumley and Roger Allam as a long-married couple who go about their day-to-day lives.

"I actually wrote it for Joanna, as she epitomises how we all want to be as we get older," Jan explains.

"I was fed up with the portrayals of older women as tetchy divorcees, miserably married, or useless grandmothers. I wanted somebody who was like me – someone who grew up in the summer of love and loved life, and was still dancing in the street to Martha and The Vandellas, and perhaps married to the guy she met at Glastonbury '71."

When presented with the script, Joanna was nothing but receptive and eager to get involved.

"When she read it, she said 'You've been listening at my window, Jan'. When I asked her who she wanted to play her husband, she said 'All of my

girlfriends want to be married to Roger Allam, so it has to be him', which was brilliant as he was choice too, but I had to ask her."

When asked to sum it up, Jan explains that *Conversations From A Long Marriage* is very much about a couple who are still in love with life, music, and each other.

"It's just the two of them talking, but it's been massively successful which is delightful."

So successful in fact that it recently scooped the award for Best Radio Comedy at the Voice of the Listener and Viewer Awards 2021.

It's no wonder it was greenlit for a third instalment.

"Everybody wanted another season – including the two stars."

Both the second and third seasons were recorded remotely in lockdown – but that didn't stop the chemistry from flowing between the two protagonists.

"They're two of the best voices in radio and like each other so much. They laugh all the time in the studio, it's a wonder we get any work done! It's absolutely wonderful to have them, and it's fantastic to work with people I like and admire."

Over the years, Jan has written comedy roles for some of Britain's biggest and brightest stars – including the likes of Linda Bellingham, Penelope Keith, James Bolam, Simon Pegg, and Richard Wilson.

There's a definite art and skill needed for scriptwriting – even more so when it comes to writing for radio, as Jan explains.

"You have to be careful and make sure you don't do what we call in the business 'this gun in my right hand is loaded' dialogue, which is where you say what's happening because you know the audience can't see what's going on. So you have to be really creative in how you write."

"In this season for instance, there's a scene where Roger and Jo are in the bath together, so there had to be lots of noises like squeaks and water splashes. But there's so much more you can do with radio than on television – you can have bath scenes with older people which I'm not sure

Jan Etherington with her dog Jagger on Walberswick beach



Dame Joanna Lumley and Roger Allam recording *Conversations from a Long Marriage* during its first season



Jan Etherington, pictured with Dame Joanna Lumley (centre) and Roger Allam (left)



Jan Etherington with her dog Jagger on Walberswick beach

Pictures: SARAH LUCY BROWN

primetime television would be able to cope with! Radio is just so much more creative, and the audience love using their imagination."

And where does Jan get her inspiration from, when it comes to penning conversations between the two?

"All writers use their own source material – but it's not autobiographical in that sense," she says.

Jan, who has written hundreds of comedies over the years, many with her husband Gavin, draws upon both real life and her imagination when it comes to putting pen to paper:

"When I began writing this, I asked Gavin 'what do you think is the secret to a long and happy marriage?' and he said 'well you tell me what you think it is and I'll agree'. It's probably why we're still together after 35 years!"

So what can listeners expect from the upcoming third season?

"Some new neighbours move in – with their three children, a dog, hot tub, and trampoline in tow which causes a lot of friction. And

there's always a lot of drama in the lives of their friends Sally and Peter."

But there are a number of poignant moments throughout, too.

"In the last series, a friend died and it was an enormous shock, so they start talking more about death and how their time limited. It really resonates with the listener, who can understand the subject and how they talk about it."

It's not all doom and gloom though – as the soundtrack throughout evokes a strong sense of nostalgia.

"The characters met when they were teens, and they talk about their early lives scattered throughout the season, so the music used throughout reflects that era."

Think The Kinks, The Animals, and Davie Bowie. That sort of thing.

"I think the listeners love the songs, as it takes us all back to those lovely years when we were young, going to Glastonbury and listening to fantastic music. It's

the soundtrack of their lives and mine."

Radio show aside, Jan is keeping busy. She's also working on a few plays locally alongside her other writing duties, and

plans to release a script book for *Conversations From A Long Marriage* which is due out at Christmas.

"It really is the show that keeps on giving, it's fantastic," she adds.

Conversations From A Long Marriage will return with its third season on BBC Radio 4 on Wednesday, March 2 at 6.30pm. Seasons one and two can be found on BBC Sounds.