

Perfect illusion

Hove author Holly Smale aims to encourage young girls to shatter the illusion of perfection with the latest instalment in her Valentines series, finds Simone Hellyer

Being a teenager can be tough – all those emotions and hormones rushing through your brain and body for the first time. But that's what makes teenagers such rich pickings for literature, something that bestselling author Holly Smale can certainly attest to.

The Hove-based author is beloved by teenagers all over the world as the creator of the Geek Girl series which tells the story of Harriet Manners, a socially awkward 15-year-old girl who is unexpectedly scouted as a model. The series struck a chord with teens and became a phenomenal success for Holly, selling over three million copies and being translated into 30 languages.

And now Holly is back with the second instalment in her Valentines series, *Far From Perfect*. The Valentines are three teenage sisters who are born into a famous acting dynasty, with each book telling the story of one sister. In book two we meet Faith, the middle sister, whose perfect life appears to be every girl's dream.

"The younger sister, Hope, and the older sister, Mercy, both have very strong characters with very different, but very powerful narrative voices. And when I came to writing Faith, I was stuck for about a week because she's perfect," explains Holly.

She adds: "She's the most beautiful in the family, she's sweet, kind, and always trying to keep the peace. And she is also the one who everyone expects to become a movie star like her mum. So I kept wondering how I was going to write this girl because to be honest, she sounds kind of boring. I thought that there wasn't much to get into, but that's the story. Here is this girl who has no voice or idea of what she wants, who can't speak up for herself because she is so busy

trying to live for everybody else. That's when I got really excited about it and fell in love with Faith. I also realised that it's part of a much bigger issue, with young girls and women often swallowing their voice to make themselves more attractive or presentable."

The books can read as standalone novels but are best read in series to fully appreciate the complexity of family dynamics that Holly has woven into the stories. "My first series, *Geek Girl*, had a strong family dynamic too, but that was a close family, whereas with *The Valentines*, family life is a lot more chaotic. Character is the most important thing for me when I'm writing, so when it comes to studying how those characters interact in a family there's no end to what you can do," Holly explains.

The rise of social media and

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ordinary people becoming famous as YouTubers has had an extraordinary impact on the lives of young people and their perceptions of themselves. And Holly explores fame and media in a big way in this book. "Faith is already famous at only 16 years old and so she has a very strong online media presence, but she is actually a very private person. And she's not even writing her own media messages, they're being written for her by her grandmother's PR team. So, the story also examines how real the stuff we present to the world is, especially on social media. Often young people forget that none of it is real. Perhaps the perfect life isn't for everybody and might not be what makes you happy," Holly says.

On the importance of fame to young people, she adds: "Having worked in the children's industry for a decade now, I listen really

hard to what young people are interested in and I really try to tap into that. Fame is something that is hugely important to them and the way that society has changed means that it's much more important now than it used to be. I wouldn't say that I'm famous, but I have had some bizarre experiences like being greeted at the airport with a TV crew and banners and the disorientating feeling of people crying when they meet you, so I was able to tap into that for this series. Faith really struggles with fame because she is very private and shy, and that's something that I felt, of the three sisters, I most related to. I've really struggled with being open and vulnerable in public and I think that is a really interesting topic to tackle for young people."

Holly put a lot of her own experiences into her characters, and says she finds the process of writing as a teenager "disturbingly easy!"

"I just think teenagers are incredibly interesting", she says, adding: "I remember very vividly being a teenager and how fresh, new, scary and fascinating everything is. When you've gone through your 500th break up it's very difficult for that to have as much impact as your first heartbreak."

Regularly interacting with her young readers at schools and festivals also helps Holly keep up to date with what teenagers care about. A keen reader when she was younger, one of Holly's biggest motivations is to inspire children to connect to characters in literature the way she did. And with letters pouring in from readers across the globe, it looks like she has succeeded. ♦ *The Valentines: Far From Perfect* is published on 23 July, £7.99 by HarperCollins Children's Books.

