

From Blog to Books

In one year, *Petite Anglaise*, an English blogger in Paris, fell in love with one of her readers, got fired from her company, and won a book contract.

By Julie Pecheur

These words greeted the thousands of faithful readers who logged on to *Petite Anglaise*'s blog last April. The hastily typed message that followed did nothing to reassure them: "I will return. In a week or so. (Tapole [sic] and I are fine, please don't worry!)" And then for two weeks, *Petite Anglaise* went silent. Her life—and her blog—between parentheses.

Because of her online diary, *petite-anglaise.com*, Catherine Sanderson was fired from Dixon Wilson, a British accountancy firm with offices in Paris, accused of blogging from work and disgracing the firm. But *Petite Anglaise* fought back, arguing at the *prud'hommes*, France's employment court, that she had written anonymously and had never identified her employers.

Last month, she won her case and received a year's salary, worldwide exposure and the promise of a new start. One more time, her blog had changed her life.

Catherine Sanderson became *Petite Anglaise* in July 2004, after reading an article in *The Guardian* about Belle de Jour, the online diary of a supposed London call girl who became famous and struck a book deal. "It thought it was something I could try and do myself," she recalls. "I didn't want it to be the diary of a secretary, because that would be very boring. I thought that what people might find interesting about my life was the fact that I lived in Paris."

Gradually, *petite anglaise* became more personal, especially when "things were not great."

The blog's name was an easy find. Catherine, 34, grew up in Yorkshire and graduated in French and German from Bath, but she spent all her working life in France, where she was always referred to as "*la petite Anglaise*." She worked in a high school in Normandy and as a teaching assistant at La Sorbonne, and then figured the best way to stay in France was to obtain a bilingual secretary diploma in England. She returned to Paris, and joined Dixon Wilson in 2002. The following year, she had a daughter with a French man.

At the beginning, Catherine's blog consisted of comparisons with England and descriptions of her everyday life. Yet, people noticed. After only a month, *The Guardian* mentioned the site and the daily audience grew from five to about 200. In 2005, thousands of new visitors came when the blog



Catherine Sanderson, aka *Petite Anglaise*, is now under contract for two books.

was nominated for a Bloggie award.

Gradually, *Petite Anglaise* became more personal, especially when "things were not great." She wrote about being bored at work, confessed feeling strange about motherhood (she calls her daughter Tadpole) and shared her doubts about her relationship with "Mr Frog"—with tact, because he also read the blog.

In April 2005, the unexpected happened: she fell for Jim, a reader who left comments on the site. They discreetly moved to her email inbox, before meeting for real. The ensuing breaking up with Mr Frog left supportive readers holding their breath—while typing their advice.

Petite Anglaise officially announced the affair with Jim on the site. "For a long time, I didn't say who he was, but people knew it was somebody who had commented so they tried to guess. It was like a game," she relates. "We had a very public relationship: I talked about how it started, about how it ended, about everything that happened in between," she adds. "There were times when I had doubts about us and I was writing so on the blog, and he would read it and write back."

Catherine followed self-imposed rules: "I am kind of conscious that my mother reads it, so I am not going to write about explicit sex. And I just try to make sure that I don't hurt anyone's feeling or say anything I am not prepared to say in the flesh."

Petite Anglaise was barely recovering from the break-up with Jim, when a co-worker informed her boss about the site (which was attracting 3,000 viewers daily) and Catherine was fired. Stunned, she posted the "transmission interrupted"

message and contacted a lawyer.

In July, when her contract was officially terminated, she finally revealed online what had happened. *The Daily Telegraph* simultaneously broke the story, creating instant fame. AP and AFP picked up the story and television and radio reporters from all over the world called her and sent photographers. In England, tabloids tricked her into divulging her parents' address and aggressively tried to reveal her daughter's name to better bash the "unmarried mother."

The site registered up to 30,000 visitors one day, before automatically shutting down, unable to cope with the traffic. *Petite Anglaise* received hundreds of emails from readers, among them messages from publishers and literary agents saying they were interested in her writing. "I thought maybe there is hope somewhere else and I might not have to be a secretary anymore," she says.

Catherine traveled to London and picked an agent. She refused to simply license the blog and wrote a book proposal. "I kind of figured that this was my one chance to do something and I wanted to do it well."

The story of how her blog changed her life triggered a bidding war among publishers. She finally signed a contract for two books with Penguin (with an advance of around 500,000 euros) and sold her story in nine other countries, including the United States.

The site audience has now stabilized at 4,000, but Catherine writes only a couple of posts a week. She is currently struggling seven hours a day to finish her first manuscript by July. She does so in a rented office—deliberately without Internet access. ■

www.petiteanglaise.com