



Sophie Dahl's metamorphosis over the past decade has been one of dignity and poise. Ever since she was thrust onto Vivienne Westwood's catwalk, plus-sized, slightly shy and a fashion world phenomenon, Dahl has glided from the catwalk to the film stage, to the literary arena and now, it would seem, into the food world.

While bookshelves and TV screens may be littered with many a celebrity chef, Dahl is embracing this new terrain with the ease and charm with which she has done everything else. And with a new home about to be completed, a magnificent love with Jamie Cullum and a fantastic new book, *Miss Dahl's Voluptuous Delights*, due to hit bookstores on 1 May, Dahl has, it seems, the world very much at her firmly grounded feet.

Following in the success of *The Man With The Dancing Eyes* and *Playing With The Grown Ups*, the latest book, 'a woven recipe and anecdote book' presents Dahl exploring yet another literary genre, so why food?

'I decided to write the food book because I've always cooked. She explains. 'I grew up in a family of foodies and also, the question I was incessantly asked over any other was: "Ooh, how did you get so thin?"' Her 'food-moir', as she calls it, hopes to address weight and health issues 'in a sort of fun, creative way that answers that question without labouring the point. I loathe militant diet books and formulaic eating and I love food.'

A love of food seems to have seeped into Dahl from a very young age, along with all things literary.

'My whole family, we're all so greedy,' she exclaims, though it seems both sets of grandparents loved to cook: 'I was taught to cook really by my paternal grandmother who I called Gigi.'

Wary of the competitive mine field she is stepping into, Dahl seems totally unfazed. More than aware of how her body has been scrutinised by the media over the years, some feel she is the perfect person to write such a book, due to her dignified and seemingly private transformation, both physical and professional. Having lived her twenties in the glare of the public eye and lost weight without fuss, it's unsurprising women are keen to know her secret. She is humble about the power of her word but recognises the importance of what she writes.

'I'm an authority on few things but on eating and bodies I take full credit for knowing about because I've been a multitude of shapes and sizes.' And she is unconcerned with public scrutiny.

'Once [the book] is out there it doesn't really belong to you anymore so people will make their own judgements and come to their own conclusions. The whole ethos of my cookbook is simple. It's about eating what you want and not making a fuss about it.'

Dahl ponders with great thought when asked what she hopes women will get out of this book.

'Essentially, it's a cook book, a food-moir of food for food-lovers.' She admits that upon

entering her 30s her own personal attitude to food has certainly changed.

'Suddenly food isn't this great complicated thing. I think we're so programmed as women to buy into whatever is being touted as being the miracle to get you thin, but it's about balance and moderation.'

Miss Dahl's Voluptuous Delights is certainly not going to be full of fad diet tricks, but rather Dahl's own personal stories, recipes and culinary anecdotes.

'We get so distracted by other things out there,' she exclaims, 'eradicate entire food groups, only eat cabbage soup for a week, only eat hard boiled eggs and grapefruits... it's become so over-complicated.' But for her it is just about keeping it simple.

'I loathe the word diet, I don't think that should be a word in our vocabulary.'

Dahl now writes regularly for certain publications outside of her book writing, so what else, one can't help but wonder, has she lined up for her future? Sophie has always been obsessed with old-fashioned scents, so would she develop her own perfume? 'Just for the sheer fun and joy of it,' she admits, 'but I would never be able to do one that made any money because I wouldn't want to do a big commercial project. I'd want to do the little, quirky one you can't find in many places.'

This shying away from huge commercial success seems to have defined Dahl's career to date, yet has in no way had any impact on her overall success. No matter what she embarks upon, her own idiosyncratic attitude seems to see her through every time and her acceptance of herself, at this juncture

in her life, presents her as a confident, incredibly intelligent and resolutely stunning woman.

She has no regrets on her days of modelling, and if anything, she appears to credit her time in front of the camera for giving her the quiet confidence to take on a literary career – one many watched with added scrutiny due to her Roald Dahl lineage.

'I'd far rather be 31 and writing than 21 and modelling, but that's not to say that I disliked modelling. It was an adventure. I learnt how to adapt to any situation, and I suppose I found a sense of confidence in my own femininity, for want of a better word, but writing is what it's all been about really.'

It's this writing that defines the teenage Dahl I met so many years ago, glamorously wrapped in a fake-fur and suede coat headed for a night at the Whirly Gig. Her poems, written late at night about some awful boy were the stuff of legend, and as we sit here musing on her journey towards this juncture as a successful published writer, we reminisce on some classics. She quotes her most memorable to me, written one heart-breaking bonfire night in the early 90s:

'Fireworks in the heavens,
Fireworks in my head,
One vodka too many,
Now I wish I were dead!'

They were rhyming, girly, whimsical poems and though her work has no doubt taken on a far greater maturity in recent years, her love of writing at such a young age seemed to predetermine the life she would be leading today. So from 21 to

31, Dahl has done more than most achieve in a lifetime, with good old-fashioned heartbreak thrown in the mix, but where does she like to see herself at 41?

'I think pretty similar to where I am now but with a few more books under my belt, a few more wrinkles and possibly even babies. I don't have a grand master plan. As nauseating as it sounds, I really couldn't get much happier than this. I feel pretty grateful for my lot so I'd be lucky if it carried on in the same way.'

Before we part on what is Inauguration Day, I ask Dahl her feelings on the American election, as someone who has American citizenship, and if she feels more at home back here in England than she did living in New York.

'I feel pretty proud to be an American after [Obama's] swearing in, and I felt proud to be an American on the day the votes were counted, but I'm also equally proud to be English and I feel my whole sensibility is English.' It is her Englishness that seems to define the essence of Sophie's personality.

'I grew up with English humour. I grew up in a rambly, quirky family and I got very homesick when I lived in America. You crave that basic mundane tea, Eastenders, the rumble of a black taxi, the rain... I came back to live in the summer of incessant rain and I've never been so happy to see such rain. Obviously, I wasn't living in a flooded area but that constant drum of the rain made me think 'oh I'm home,' she says smiling, a huge great grin on that very lovely, very English face of hers. ■

Miss Dahl's Voluptuous Delights will be published by Harper Collins on 1 May 2009.

MEDIA DAHLING



Sophie Dahl was never your average run-of-the-mill model. She quietly revolutionised the narrow conventions of the fashion world, and could break yet more boundaries in the literary world. Cass Chapman catches up with Dahl to discuss her new book *Miss Dahl's Voluptuous Delights*.