

WHEN THE SHOE FITS

A decade on from her debut novel, *The Devil Wears Prada*, New York author Lauren Weisberger is ready to let her characters take the stage again, writes Sally Browne

It's been 10 years since Andy Sachs stormed out on her boss, the tyrannical editor of *Runway* magazine Miranda Priestly.

And it's been 10 years since her creator Lauren Weisberger hit *The New York Times* best-seller list with her debut novel, *The Devil Wears Prada*, which went on to sell 4 million copies, was translated into 27 languages and later made into a hit film starring Meryl Streep and Anne Hathaway.

Weisberger, who lives in New York with her young family, has written three other books since then. But ever since she released her second book, *Everyone Worth Knowing*, she has been asked the same question: what's it like to follow up on the success of *The Devil Wears Prada*.

That question is more relevant than ever now, as she has delved into that fictional world again and has written the sequel, appropriately titled *Revenge Wears Prada*.

It's 10 years on, and Andy is on the verge of marriage. We meet her, nerves aflutter, on the day of her wedding. She's also about to launch her own magazine with former *Runway* assistant Emily. And Miranda Priestly is still haunting her nightmares, quite literally, from day one on page one, in the angst-ridden sheets of her pre-marital bed.

Weisberger's life has changed a great deal too. She's now 36, married to playwright and screenwriter Mike Cohen and is mother of a girl and boy, aged one and two.

"It's pretty chaotic here but it's really fun," the author says on the phone from her New York apartment. Writing no longer means staying up till 4am drinking coffee when the muse takes her. It's now a get-down-to-work affair between sleeps and feeds.

For Weisberger, the idea of a sequel is something that's been percolating for a long time. *Prada* literally changed her life. She went from a fired *Vogue* assistant spinning on the shock of a horrible year working for formidable editor Anna Wintour, to expunging her experiences in a creative writing class to becoming a best-selling author. Some of her readers may have wondered whatever happened to Andy and Miranda, the thinly veiled fictionalisations of herself and Wintour. Weisberger wondered too.

While she has been busy living her life, somewhere in the background, her characters have been living theirs, and are ready to take the stage again.

"I look back and I was so young and sort of bright-eyed



and new to everything when I wrote the first book and 10 years has passed and so much changes in that time, especially in your 20s and your 30s," she says.

"There's just so much life happening. So I got really curious about how it would look to see these characters that I developed a decade ago. What would have happened in their own lives? The more I started thinking about it, the more I really wanted to see it through."

About to be a bride, and the editor of a bridal magazine, everything seems to be falling into place for Andy. But that's when the "shoe drops" says her creator.

Like in any good sequel, Andy's nemesis returns. But rather than being her "day-by-day, minute-by-minute, round-the-clock torturer" Miranda takes an overarching role, a larger-than-life foe popping up to terrify her protagonist like a well-dressed Godzilla.

"It was fun to kind of get back in there," Weisberger says. "And when she does appear and find ways of tormenting Andy, it was really exciting for me as a writer to figure out what they're going to look like. I feel like the pace sort of picks up, the colours get brighter and things get more exciting. She's the devil."

★★★



Sweet revenge: Lauren Weisberger has written a sequel.

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She's also firmly fictitious. While the triumphs of her whirlwind success left Weisberger's head spinning, she also had to deal with the fall-out from writing a tell-all roman à clef that put the dagger into fashion royalty.

As a young writer, just 25 when *The Devil Wears Prada* was released, Weisberger was unprepared for the harsh reviews and backlash she received.

Vogue publisher Conde Nast reacted by not reacting at all, and ignoring the book altogether. But there were some, such as former *Vogue* staffer Kate Betts, who wrote in *The New York Times* that Weisberger's main character had "an unbecoming superiority complex and is just as much a snob as the snobs she is thrown in with".

When the reviews came in, Weisberger went underground. She learned to develop a thick skin.

She avoided talking about her work at parties – her friends knew not to introduce her as the *Prada* author. But it also brought immense success – and when the book was optioned into a film, it was a dream come true.



White stuff: Anne Hathaway stars as Andy Sachs.



When shooting began in 2005, Weisberger was on the set almost every day. They even made her a director's chair with her name on it, and she had a tiny cameo as Miranda Priestly's nanny. It was a thrilling time for the small-town girl.

The final chess play came when she found herself at the opening night of the film with Wintour in 2006, although the pair never spoke.

Wintour was initially disparaging of the book and film, but in her icily tactful way, she softened her viewpoint, calling it "entertaining". Today, Weisberger and her former boss don't move in the same circles and rarely cross paths.

But Weisberger had no intention of putting the steak-knife into Wintour. She had no intention of even writing a book. After *Vogue* – the 11 months where she had to endure 7am starts, errands running well into the night, and routine coffee-fetching – she went to work for a travel magazine and took up creative writing classes in the evening.

She started writing about her experiences at *Vogue* as a sort of exercise. It was therapeutic, and fun.

Her tutor liked what she read and encouraged her to do more. Pretty soon she had a decent collection of anecdotes, a novel in the making. Her teacher submitted it to an agent, who sold the book within a week with an impressive advance of \$250,000 (\$50,000 is considered good). It was a novelist's fairytale.

Then, she naively had no idea what reactions she might receive. But she says not knowing was probably for the best. Otherwise, she would have been paralysed with fear.

This time, she wasn't so nervous about bringing her larger-than-life characters back in play. In *Revenge Wears Prada*, she's not afraid to make her nemesis as venomous as ever. And she's not worried about the responses she might receive.

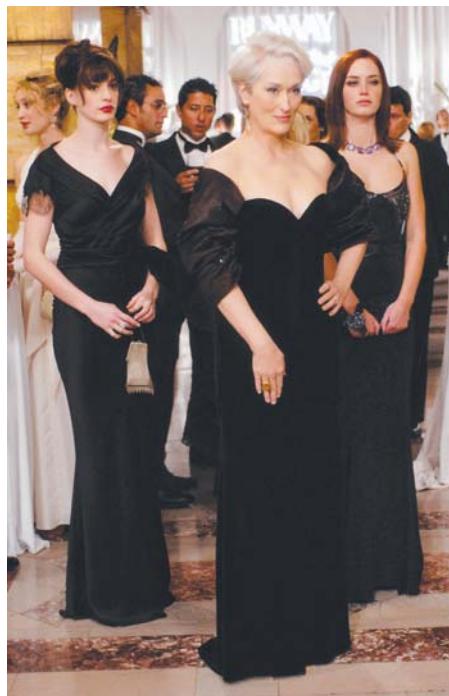
"No, this was such a fun book to write. It's meant to be something that you can hopefully read on the beach," she says. "It's the same kind of glamour and fun and celebrity sexiness of the first one in a slightly different way."

And while Miranda Priestly may have diverged from Anna Wintour, Andy Sachs has diverged from Lauren Weisberger too. This time, like all of her post-*Prada* books, she writes in the third person.

"My life has taken a pretty different path, unlike the first book which was really based a lot on my experiences at *Vogue* and working for Anna."

While it might have begun as a story about the magazine industry, *Revenge Wears Prada* is also about the doubts and vulnerabilities that come with trying to keep pace in a hectic and often judgmental world.

Concerns about entering the 30s, the perfect marriage and babies are now on the agenda as well as career. Weisberger's characters occupy a fast-paced *Sex and the*



Grown up: Anne Hathaway (top) and with actress Meryl Streep (above) in scenes from the hugely-successful movie *The Devil Wears Prada*.

City world of newspaper social pages, Hamptons holidays and Gatsby-esque glamour. It's a world that probably hasn't changed much in 100 years.

But Weisberger's characters are funny and flawed, and show the awkwardness behind the facade, the women behind the wardrobe.

"What I tried to do probably more than anything in creating these characters is to make them feel like real people," Weisberger says. "It seems obvious. It's really what most fiction writers are trying to do, but I want the

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characters to be flawed and I want them to be funny and I want them to be true to their personalities from 10 years ago but to have evolved and grown in different and unexpected ways, the way real people do."

The process of writing is challenging in itself. Weisberger says she isn't always rushing to the keyboard. But she has managed to achieve a balance of writing and parenting that she shares with her husband, who is also a writer. In fact, it's her husband who first gets to read a draft.

While juggling the napped bottoms of little ones, Weisberger has had to wean herself off being a night-owl to an all-times-of-the-day bird.

"Now it's all very boring and regimented. It's changed a lot. Pre-kids, even pre-husband it was very much as the inspiration struck me. I wrote better at night and I would stay up till 3, 4 or 5 in the morning and then sleep really late. I was a night person. Now it's all very much this kind of patchwork quilt of nursery school schedules and daddy schedules and nanny schedules, and when can I carve out a few hours at almost the same time every day."

★★★

Weisberger had no ambitions to enter the fast lane. She grew up in small-town Pennsylvania, geographically close to the Big Apple but as far away as you could get in every other way.

"I definitely lived by all the rules. I studied hard. I dated nice boys. I did things that made my parents happy and I hope my daughter does the same."

She went away to Cornell University and her horizons broadened. She travelled abroad for a year. Her job at *Vogue* was her first step into the "real world". It was a rude awakening.

"My first shot out of school after the rural childhood and the really big, beautiful super relaxed campus university experience was *Vogue* magazine in downtown Manhattan and that definitely left my head spinning."

The termination of her role – one that so many would have been dying for – was brave or possibly stupid, she says. "Maybe a little bit brave," she says. "I felt a lot of people thought I was being stupid by walking away from this opportunity. I felt scared of what the next thing was going to be and was I making a mistake, all of those things that probably people feel when they leave any job."

But it was a move that, of course, led to bigger and better things. Now it's time to see where the next chapter of her story will take her.

And with *Revenge*, there will be more scrutiny than ever. Her book hits the international shelves this week, and for the next month she'll be touring the US.

"I hope so much that readers like it and that they'll relate to it. There's something amazing about getting out and actually meeting with people who read your book."