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WOMEN AT WORK

Interview: Elizabeth Day

V.F. meets the journalist, author and podcaster.

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JENNY SMITH PHOTOGRAPHY

You could be forgiven for feeling intimidated by Elizabeth Day's many accolades. Yet, even with a *Sunday Times* top five best-selling memoir (*How to Fail: Everything I've Ever Learned from Things Going Wrong*), chart-topping podcast ("How to Fail with Elizabeth Day"), and four highly esteemed novels under her belt—not to mention the demure beauty of an English rose—one can't help feeling at ease in her company.

Perhaps this is down to the innate empathy that prompted her comforting lockdown podcast episodes. "It's not like I'm a really helpful frontline worker, so when the pandemic struck I thought, 'what can I do?'" Or maybe it's because Elizabeth knows all too well that strength lies in vulnerability after ending a marriage, failing to have children naturally, and undergoing the painstaking cultivation of self-awareness that is long-term therapy. Either way, somehow I felt I'd known her for years.

Keenly aware of her privilege, Elizabeth told me how lucky she felt to have grown up in a household where books were readily available; her parents read to her at bedtime, and a lot of value was placed on the written word. So, aged four: "when I announced that I wanted to write books and no one laughed at me, I totally believed that that was a valid ambition".

Aged seven, she'd decided journalism would be her in-road, and at 12, she wrote to all her local newspaper editors: "You need a children's columnist and I'm 12 and I'm your woman". Giggling at her youthful precociousness, Elizabeth explained how, after landing a fortnightly column in the *Derry Journal* and being paid for it, the satisfaction and sense of independence only fuelled her ambition. "I remember vividly getting a cheque for £72 and buying my first ever pair of Doc Martin boots. They had purple laces and I was obsessed with them."

Off to a flying start, it seemed things were going to work out just like she'd imagined. Determination and hard work had paid off and Elizabeth was establishing herself at the *Sunday Telegraph* when a series of new editors meant she had to prove herself again and again. "I was going into the office everyday and working really hard but I wasn't feeling fulfilled."

Fulfillment is something Elizabeth now cites as her real goal when looking to the future. For a long time she was someone who could whip out a five-year plan at the drop of a hat, but after facing the brutal reality that even our most fundamental aspirations may never come true, she's learned to reorientate her perspective. Two rounds of failed IVF and two miscarriages are immensely painful experiences, so when Elizabeth spoke of them as "a cause of great sadness, but a really necessary lesson", I felt moved by her ability to find strength in grief.

This is how she does it. As a trailblazer for emotional openness, Elizabeth paves the way for the rest of us to drop our guard, sigh out any pretence, and connect authentically with those around us. When life feels like a succession of roles to perform—employee, girlfriend, homemaker, yogi—there’s nothing more relieving than throwing out the script and being unapologetically yourself.

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“I left my marriage and there was some instinct guiding me to do that, even though I felt terrible shame and guilt. I knew it was the right decision and I realised it’s never too late to change your life. It felt very liberating, like ‘Oh! You’re allowed to be who you really are!’ And not only that but it’s a GOOD thing, it turns out your life is better because of it.”

Since then, Elizabeth has showcased some of the world’s most successful people, including Olympic athlete Dame Kelly Holmes, former Google X Chief Business Officer Mo Gawdat, and Michelin-starred chef Tom Kerridge, being their most relatable selves. By coaxing the vulnerability out of those we admire, Elizabeth reveals that it’s the vulnerability itself that’s admirable.

She knows that some people are given more space to fail than others. “I’m white, I’m middle class, I own a laptop and have a roof over my head. I can’t speak to the experience of a Black person in America or someone living with chronic illness.” But, in seeking out diverse voices for the podcast, Elizabeth ensures her privilege doesn’t alienate listeners from the message it purveys: you’re OK.

We may not be winning double gold medals or leading multibillion dollar companies, but the point is that those who do are just as fallible as we are. They cry, they worry, they fail, and they also know when to relax. What does relaxing look like for Elizabeth? “I need to have a bath, watch reality television and eat a crumpet.” That, I can get on board with.

Her new book, *Failosophy*, is out in October.

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