



The Wife of Bath

**“I mean to give the best years of my life
To the acts and satisfactions of a wife.”**

The tale

Beth Craddock is 53 and a successful television actress who still believes in Mr Right – despite a number of failed marriages behind her. When her husband of 16 years leaves her for another woman she finds comfort in the arms of her 22-year-old co-star, Jerome. They fall passionately in love, but behind the smiles the pressures of their age difference are never far away.

Credits

Writer Sally Wainwright
Director Andy De Emmony
Beth Julie Walters
Jerome Paul Nicholls
James Bill Nighy

“I loved this very funny script, which cleverly combines the prologue and the *Tale*, to explore love and attraction in a story that’s still very relevant today, with a strong, sexually confident woman at its heart.”

Andy De Emmony, director of *The Wife of Bath*



interview

Sally Wainwright is the writer of *The Wife of Bath*

The post-feminist world may decree that a woman needs a man like a fish needs a bicycle – but even after seven centuries there are still those female fishes with a penchant for pedals!

“Chaucer’s *Wife of Bath* was a feminist ahead of her time,” insists writer Sally Wainwright, “but then she lets herself down by this Achilles’ heel of having to have a man in her life. She’s one of those women who just doesn’t seem to be able to function unless she’s part of someone else.

“That can still be true so I made Beth in charge of her own TV production company, to give her a power that the *Wife of Bath* seems to have. She’s ebullient, she’s full of energy, she’s got very focused ideas about what she wants to do. She’s very sure of her own opinions and doesn’t seem to care what other people think of her.

“She’s very confident, apart from this need for a man. She can’t feel complete in herself unless she’s got one.”

Wainwright – creator of *At Home With The Braithwaites* and *Sparkhouse*, a sex-swap reworking of *Wuthering Heights* – loved the idea of this vulnerability in a strong woman. “One of the unusual things about the original is that the prologue is longer than the *Tale* itself, even though the tale is very interesting.

“So I felt it was important to represent both. That’s why I chose to make Beth an actress, to tell two stories, the story of her real life and the story of what she does in the TV programme.

“Initially I wanted to make her someone who hadn’t given in to the tyranny of wanting to look young. She’s someone who was successful enough to be able to say, ‘I’m old and proud of it and I don’t care.’

But she feels she needs to hold on to this young man so much.”

So taken with Chaucer’s verse was this former *Coronation Street* writer that she even included a saucy original line in the script. “Beth is very drunk and says she ‘wouldn’t begrudge her Chamber of Venus to a likely lad!’,” she laughs.

“I was thrilled when they got Julie Walters on board and Paul Nicholls, who’s fantastic – I’m a big fan of Paul’s. Then, when I had to do any rewrites, I just couldn’t help thinking of Julie’s voice and I was conscious at times of making it funnier as a result!”



interview

Julie Walters plays Beth in *The Wife of Bath*

She may have taken her kit off for charity in the cheeky film *Calendar Girls*, but Julie Walters admits she was rather more nervous about baring all in steamy sex scenes with dishy Paul Nicholls in *The Wife of Bath*.

"I said, 'I don't want anyone to see anything from nipple to knee, OK?'" she reveals with a laugh. "So I am totally encased! I have the hugest underwear on – big knickers and a bra that started at my neck and went down to my waist, just to hide everything. So I felt OK, although I think you can see a bit of thigh!

"I didn't want to embarrass Paul, he's so lovely and we were both nervous," she explains. "On the very first day we were shagging in the caravan. On the second day of shooting we had a big bed scene in the studio. There I was with this gorgeous young man – I should have been paying the BBC!"

At 53, Walters is a powerful force in the business, with an OBE, two Oscar nominations – for the films *Educating Rita* and *Billy Elliot* – and a string of Best Actress awards, from *Boys From The Black Stuff* to *My Beautiful Son*. She was also recently voted Britain's favourite actress of all time and dubbed 'a national treasure'.

But she insists that Beth – the high-flying actress and TV producer she plays in *The Wife of Bath* – is a very different creature. "She is all wrapped up in her own career, everything is centred around that," explains Julie. She's in a long-running series and that's given her a lot of power behind the scenes as well. "She's also very sexually confident: to her, sex is a game, great fun. I'm not like her in that sense. I'm not someone who thinks, 'Whoah! I'm going to have him!' I've never been like that. I wouldn't dare do the things she does. So it was a bit scary – that's partly what attracted me to the part."

Like Chaucer's gap-toothed, scarlet-stockinged original, Beth has one fatal flaw. Despite her success, her fame and her fortune, she can't exist without a man. "She is so needy of male approval," sighs Julie. "I decided that maybe her father left her when she was a kid. She is powerful, but also vulnerable, all her relationships are so disastrous and

immature really – but I love all that. I thought it was very accurately written. I read the first page and knew I wanted to do it – I've never done that before. I thought it was a little gem."

Julie remembers studying the prologue to *The Canterbury Tales* for A-level back home in Birmingham, but didn't know *The Wife of Bath*. "I looked it up on the internet and thought, 'Yes, I fancy her.'"

"It's about the woman wanting to be in charge and I think that's right," reasons Julie. "But she does that by trying to please the man too much. She hasn't got a proper sense of self. She sees herself in the reflection of what other people think of her, which is an actor's thing. It's 600 years since it was written and there is something rather comforting about knowing that we don't really change that much, that we will always be vulnerable. We do move on, but we're still flawed. We are not working towards perfection – there's no such thing."

That is a lesson yet to be learned by some screen stars – and Beth is a woman eager to stay young for her new man. "People much younger than me are Botoxed to death," says an appalled Julie.

"I do feel it's the road to nowhere. You're supposed to forfeit that young look for something else. That youthful thing is about a certain time in your life – your youth!

"Now is about something else, hopefully some kind of wisdom from the years you've lived. I feel the whole thing of hormone replacement therapy and face-lifts takes away that rite of passage that you need to go through. I haven't had anything like that and it's very obvious," she reveals with a deep frown as evidence. "I've got a forehead that moves about!"

With a spiky new haircut, lethal-looking fingernails and a designer wardrobe to die for, Julie has revelled in playing Beth, after a career that has included more than its fair share of 'cardie' parts. "She needs to be noticed, that's for sure, and she does look after herself, but there is so much insecurity there, so much need. You've got to know yourself and this is someone who doesn't know herself at all. Life should be about taking off the masks, not putting them on."

Over a long career Julie has donned many masks for stage and screen, but has long revelled in what she sees as her best role – as a mum. She and husband Grant Roffey went through agonies when their daughter Maisie was diagnosed with leukaemia at the age of three.

"Around the time I did *Educating Rita* I went a bit mad," she says candidly. "I was in my thirties, I'd been nominated for an Oscar and all of that – I think I was very wild. I had no home life really, no anything. When I look back I think it was very stressful, this sudden onslaught of fame. 'Oh, I'm having a

marvellous time,' I thought. But I used to drink loads. I was just going wild, escaping from it all really. I don't drink hardly at all now, there's months in between. It was around that time that I started to think that life was rather empty. I needed a sense of stability. I know everyone needs something different, but I think you do need a life partner because that's also how you find yourself."

"I know that sounds really pretentious," she adds, with an embarrassed laugh. "But having Maisie turned everything upside down, work just wasn't as important any more. Of course it's still a big part, it's how I carve out my living, through acting. But life and relationships became more of a priority, especially with Maisie's illness – that really put things in perspective. So I've worked much less since. She's 15 now and far too sensible to become an actor. She's into animals, clothes, bands, music – she's her, so whatever she wants to do is what she wants to do."

Julie is still undecided about just how and when Maisie will get to see her mum romping with teen idol Paul. "She's never seen me do anything like that and I do feel funny because I don't normally do that sort of thing," says the actress who has won legions of new, young fans as Mrs Weasley in the *Harry Potter* films. "I've told her about it – but I think I'll have to check it out first before I let the family see it!"





interview

Paul Nicholls plays Jerome in *The Wife of Bath*

With a disarming twinkle in those stunning blue eyes, Paul Nicholls insists that even in his headline-grabbing, wilder days he was nothing like bed-hopping Jerome in *The Wife of Bath*.

But few will miss the parallels. Paul made a huge hit as schizophrenic Joe in *EastEnders* at the tender age of 16 and his character, Jerome, has been in a TV series for five years. Both are hugely popular, well-off and the object of thousands of girls' dreams.

There is though, Nicholls points out, one big difference. "Jerome is far more carefree than I am and, even though he is an actor, he seems to be more interested in the things that it brings him rather than really enjoying the job.

"That's not like me at all. I've always wanted to be an actor and it's really important to me. When we first meet Jerome he's the baby of the show. He's got fame and money and an excessive lifestyle.

"He wears designer labels and has an expensive haircut and the whole works – that's something else that's not like me," he observes. "I like a few of his things, but I

would not have the bottle to wear some of the gear he has, all that silver jewellery – I'd get filled in!

"For him it works though. He's probably had more women in four years than most people have in a lifetime – and he's still only 22. He's sown so many wild oats that now he's beginning to realise that he just can't go on like that. He's just using these girls for sex, just like they are using him – and an excess of anything gets boring.

"For Jerome having sex with a girl is just like having a cup of tea and he does take advantage of his position. I've seen people like that, who have girls surrounding them all the time because they are in a certain show, and they've got the front to take advantage of that."

But reformed wild child Nicholls reveals that while he was in Britain's favourite soap he led a blameless existence. "I got

into a year-long relationship, I didn't cheat on her and I didn't see anyone else. Some people on the show were paranoid about things ending up in the papers and there was such an interest in *EastEnders* that I really took all that on board and watched what I did.

"Then, when I left the show I'd go out and I'd drink and I'd do crazy things and I'd wake up the next morning and think, 'Who did I speak to last night, what did I do?' When it all came out in the papers it was a relief in a way."

Nowadays, a more mature and reflective Nicholls has given up booze, declares there is no one special in his life and that he has reached a point where nothing is more enjoyable than work. "I stopped drinking, I don't touch anything now," he says matter-of-factly. "I'd so had enough of it all. But I don't regret one bit of what happened, because it was my path and I'm all right today."

He is more than all right. The boy from Bolton has proved his worth both on screen in *The Passion*, *Blue Dove* and *Goodbye Charlie Bright*, and on stage in *A Long Day's Journey Into Night* and *Vincent In Brixton*.

Now he's thrilled to be co-starring with Julie Walters in *The Wife of Bath*, which sees him having an affair with the 53-year-old actress.

"I pinch myself every day," he laughs, between takes on location in a muddy south London field. "Julie is the best person I've ever worked with in my life, so funny, so brilliant. I've had such a laugh on this job I really don't want it to finish."

He genuinely can't understand why in the storyline – and in real life – people have a problem with an older woman, younger man scenario. "I don't see it as a problem, but I suppose people who make decisions in television or film, the money men, must be scared about it for some reason.

"Maybe it is just because most of them are men. They know that men don't mind seeing an older guy with a younger woman, but what they don't know is if people would want to see it the other way round.

"I think everyone I've ever been out with has been older than me. Not a huge gap though," he grins, adding, "I think girls are definitely more mature anyway and in my eyes they are so strong and they can see through men – they can read you like a book, even when you think you're being so clever.

"Men are a lot more vulnerable than women – or maybe it's just relationships I've been in! A woman can spot my weaknesses and use them, if she wants to use them. Hopefully you find a nice girl that wouldn't do that."

Nicholls' name has been linked with some pretty high-profile nice girls, not least *Party of Five* actress Jennifer Love Hewitt, who plays his lover in the supernatural romantic comedy *If Only*.

He smiles at the mention of her name, but declares that work is still the most important thing.

His attitude has changed there too. "My main priority now is to really enjoy it, because I spent so much time being preoccupied with trying to be better and better, this ambition to be I don't know what.

"Now I let myself enjoy it."

