Whenever she is asked what she does for a living, Cathy Woodman describes herself as an author, a teacher and a vet.

I am very lucky to have had the opportunities to create a portfolio career, based in part on my veterinary qualification and the skills I acquired in practice, but although it sounds as if I must have had a clear career path in mind when I set out to achieve this, it would be more accurate to say that my portfolio is a result of career surfing and the seizing of chances that came my way, along with the ability to be flexible in my choices and respond to changes in my personal circumstances.

When I qualified from Cambridge in 1988, I left with no concrete plans apart from a desire to work in small animal practice in London to gain experience and enjoy life in the big city before setting up my own practice near my family in Devon.

I found my first job as an assistant, living above the practice in view of a Tube station and directly under the flight path into Heathrow, and soon discovered that although I would see at least one of every kind of condition listed in the textbooks and some that were not, I wouldn’t have much time for seeing the sights. After a year, I moved on to a new post in Surrey, married and decided to start a family.

I enjoyed working in practice, developing my communication and investigative skills, and picking up stories along the way. However, the discovery that I would need fertility treatment forced me to rethink my priorities. When my much-wanted children were born, I returned to practice part time, so I could spend as much time with them as possible.

I found that part-time work was not as fulfilling as full-time, particularly the lack of continuity and not always being able to follow cases through from beginning to end. Often, I felt more like a solovet than an integral part of the team. Also, I became frustrated with trying to juggle childcare and practice, torn between treating those emergency patients that turned up at the end of the evening surgery and collecting the children from the childminder on time.

I have always loved reading and writing fiction and thought this would be a way to fit work around my family commitments so I joined a creative writing group, wrote when the children were asleep, entered writing competitions and sent synopses and chapters of novels to agents and publishers. I tried writing articles for magazines, short stories and film scripts. In spite of endless rejections I remained stubbornly optimistic and thick-skinned, refusing to give up, but it wasn’t until 10 years later that I won the Harry Bowling Prize for a novel set in London and met my agent who sold my first book.

The current series of novels are rural romances set in Devon in the fictional market town of Talyton St George. I make use of my experiences in practice, writing about vets and animals, to add an element of realism to the stories. I can’t believe that I have had over one million words published so far; my 11th novel, Country Loving (Century), has just come out as a trade paperback and e-book, and I’m already writing the 12th.

Writing offers the ultimate in flexible working. I love getting up in the morning and escaping into my latest story because
I can be anyone I like and go anywhere I wish (and still be home for dinner!). I take a notebook and pen wherever I go and transfer ideas to the laptop later. I work closely with my agent, editor and publicist and other members of the team at the publishing house because the writing of the book is only part of the story. I spend at least a third of my time editing to make sure the writing is up to a publishable standard.

I am a member of the Romantic Novelists Association and also maintain a web presence with Facebook, a blog and Twitter to communicate with my readers, and I write short stories to promote my books.

Teaching

Before writing began to give me a reasonable income, I saw an advertisement for sessional lecturers in animal management and veterinary nursing at Sparsholt College in Hampshire. One of my roles in practice was being ready to enter the workplace or progress onto the next stage of their education. I applied and have taught part time there for the past four years. I was just as apprehensive the first time I stood up in front of a class with my notes and whiteboard markers as I was when I carried out my first consultation in practice, but my time as a vet taught me how to keep calm under pressure and I survived, keen to go back for more.

Teaching uses skills I honed as a vet, such as working as part of a team, communication and being able to think on your feet. Preparing lectures involves using my creativity to engage and motivate the students and I include my industry experience and contacts to make my lessons as relevant and interesting as possible. I never thought I would make use of the veterinary anatomy and physiology I learned at Cambridge, but I have found myself teaching cell structure using plasticine and string and reviewing mnemonics for the cranial nerves.

The most rewarding part of being a teacher is seeing the students develop during the course and achieve their qualifications, ready to enter the workplace or progress onto the next stage of their education.

It has been a challenge in the last two years, writing a book every six months, teaching half-time hours, maintaining both my veterinary and teaching CPD and undertaking a postgraduate certificate in education (PGCE). The PGCE gave me the opportunity to study, carry out an Action Research project and make use of my writing skills for a different purpose. It also reminded me what is like to be a student, having to work to deadlines, and made me a more empathetic teacher, understanding that those ‘the dog ate my assignment’ excuses can be a sign that the student needs extra support.

Looking back, I have replaced one demanding yet varied career in veterinary practice with two different ones, equally demanding and varied, and equally satisfying, that I would not have tackled without my veterinary background. My recommendation would be that if you think an alternative career might suit you better than being in practice, then take a risk and try it, but be prepared to be in it for the long haul if you have ambitions to become a published author.

Ten-minute chat

Vet David Mason and his four-strong crew will be among thousands of sailors taking part in the Round the Island Race around the Isle of Wight on June 1. He will be raising money in aid of the BSAVA’s charity PetSavers.

Why is Round the Island described as Britain’s favourite race?
The race started in 1931; it’s 50 nautical miles long with 1700 boats and 16,000 sailors participating. It’s an opportunity for amateurs to compete against world-renowned sailors like Sir Ben Ainslie and Dame Ellen Macarthur – it’s the largest mass participation yacht race in the world, and the fourth largest participation sporting event in the UK.

Have you entered before?
We entered last year but having attended the weather briefing the day before, which warned of 12 foot waves, we retired when we got to the Needles.

Who will be sailing with you?
Alongside myself will be Duncan Ross who is also a vet at the Shrubbery, plus my uncle and son-in-law, as well as a friend. A couple of other friends are also helping get the boat to Cowes – it takes about four days.

Have you done much racing?
I did a bit of racing as a teenager, and at the RVC, which had a couple of Firefly dinghies on the Welsh Harp reservoir in north London; the principles are the same in bigger boats.

How tricky is it negotiating around 1700 other yachts?
Tricky – especially at the start – but we go off in groups of about 200, about half an hour apart. The Solent is pretty wide, but going round the Needles can be a bit unnerving.

How long does it take to sail around the Isle of Wight?
The current record is three hours, 53 minutes, so the first boat could be back before we start; we’re hoping to complete it in under 10 hours.

How much time do you get to sail?
Kora is moored close to my home in Suffolk, so I get out on her quite a bit in the summer. Later this year we hope to go over to see a Dutch veterinary colleague and that will be our first time crossing the Channel.

Why PetSavers?
I was chairman of fundraising for PetSavers about 20 years ago; I like supporting a charity that, through its studies, provides regular improvements in small animal medicine. With the yacht race and the London 10K, which I am doing with my daughter Kelly in July, we hope to raise £500. AT Systems, Bayer, Henry Schein, Merial, Virbac and Zoetis have already sponsored the boat, and we hope to be a floating PetSavers billboard.

Have you had any embarrassing yachting moments?
Like most sailors, I’ve fallen in a few times – I always wear a lifejacket so luckily I have never been in serious danger. I’ve run the boat aground (fortunately only on sand), and I was once rescued by a volunteer lifeboat after deliberately jumping out of a dinghy for a swim off the beach at Felixstowe.
Ten-minute chat

David Mason

Veterinary Record 2013 172: ii
doi: 10.1136/vr.f3244