

Leading Ladies

By Nancy Honey

Interviews by Hattie Garlick

Carmen Callil: *author, critic and publisher*

1938: Born in Melbourne, Australia

1960: Moved to the UK

1972: Founded Virago Press

1982: Appointed managing director of Chatto & Windus

1994: Awarded honorary doctorates by the universities of Sheffield, York, Oxford Brookes and The Open University

1999: With Colm Toibin, authored The Modern Library: 200 Best Novels in English since 1950

2007: Published Bad Faith: A Forgotten History of Family and Fatherland

We just aren't the same as the men of our generation. They were told as children: "You are the most gorgeous creature in the world, and every word you utter is a pearl of wisdom." We were told: "Carmen, we are not interested in your opinion, go to the back of the class."

I've been joking a lot to my friends about this recently, and we all agree that we were raised *not* to have self-esteem. A lot of time, effort and money went into making us feel that we must be *good girls*. We were taught to get married and have children, to remain virgins until then and to know our place. That said, it has to be remembered that I am 75 now and, please God, younger women have been spared much of that.

My feminism came from my mother. The women who lived between the wars had it worst of all. They were always patronised. I hated the way she was treated. She was a young widow with four children and was always on the receiving end of charity.

My mother always asked, "Have the boys had enough?" Many years later, I was considering a title for Margaret Foster's novel. Her grandmother, it turned out, had said the same, only her version was, "Have the men had enough?" So that became the title of her novel. I loved my brothers, but I didn't see why I should iron their shirts when they didn't have to do mine.

Dickens was a major presence in my childhood home. I imagined myself as Pip in *Great Expectations*, never as Estella. But I definitely wasn't always the adventurer. I was quite timid, you know. As a child, I was often utterly silent. I still don't speak in public with ease. But I learned to bang my fist on the table and say, "Wait a minute, I have a view on this too".

My family gave me the determination to start up Virago. They were yellors and shouters and doers. I didn't need courage to do it, I needed to work ferociously hard and I loved that, because I love to work.

Society has a hard time accepting, welcoming and celebrating successful women. I paid a big price, personally, for Virago's success, but

the authors and the books and the reading public made it worth it. At bottom I don't mind the considerable flack that's come my way, because the key thing is to have the courage to do something, and accept the slings and arrows which have always, thus far, attached themselves to women in the public eye. These things are not easy for achievers, for those women who want to make things better in this world – for both women and men.

I made a conscious decision to choose work over having a conventional family life. Every woman knows how hard it is to have it all. Each of us has to take decisions about that for herself. I had work to do.

You don't examine your choices till you get older. But different opportunities were offered to me as a young woman, like getting married and relying on other people's money, and I couldn't do it. I had to make my own way.

A male colleague told me that what I did by founding Virago was to place women's experience at the centre of the stories books tell. And women's experience is different in many ways. But their value and what they can contribute is not different. This is at the core of the injustices women still face.

I am in favour of all women shortlists. Perhaps in Scandinavian countries they aren't necessary. But here, our role models are the Queen or Margaret Thatcher. It's hardly a broad spectrum of choice, is it?

I could make a long list of difficulties that are still current but I think, for women in the Western World at least, these become easier with each passing year. Not financially perhaps, but there have been many changes and it's up to women of the next generation, and the next, to keep battling for equality of opportunity and to find ways to solve the 'having it all' problem.

Men have to help, that's the only way to move forward. Women have to make sure they do. It's a matter of acting against, not accepting, injustice. We must do this for ourselves, just as the women in Saudi Arabia will have to. It's a hard business.

Because of the way that I am, people always talk about how confrontational I can be. But there's more to me than that. I couldn't have run the publishing houses that I have without being part of a team, loving many of the people I worked with and being loved back. Much of my publishing life was great fun.

In the early days, we young women were only allowed to be book publicists, because we were pretty or young or sexy, as the case may be. But we all helped each other, and managed to rise to somewhere near the top. We had a lot of fun supporting each other on the way.

And when we got to positions of some power, we did behave differently. Take Liz Calder: her office was always a thing of beauty, full of

pictures, comfortable chairs, colour everywhere. In my case it was perhaps more eccentric, for instance I had two canaries when I ran Chatto & Windus, called, obviously, Chatto and Windus. I don't think the Americans who bought us were very amused by our canaries.

My best day as a publisher was when I first read Antonia White's *Frost in May*. I had to find a way to publish it, and that was the beginning of the Virago Modern Classics list. And when Antonia Byatt won The Booker Prize. When I first read her novel, *Possession*, I knew it was wonderful and that the public would love it. I always remember addressing sales conference and the sales reps, and seeing the unbelieving look on their faces – they saw her as an intellectual novelist with a small market for her wares. I think my fist shaking came into good use there.

If it's true that you most significant moments of your life flash before your eyes when you die then I will remember dancing with my friends in the Carnival at Rio, with tiers of shouting people on either side of the great avenue, and the music and costumes floating above and around us, like butterflies.

And I'll see the faces of all my friends, each one, and the writers and animals I've loved too. Can't wait.