

Leading Ladies

By Nancy Honey

Interviews by Hattie Garlick

Dame Gail Rebuck: *Chair, Penguin Random House UK*

1952: Born in London

1989: Joined Random House

1991: Appointed Chair and Chief Executive

1998: Co-launched the charity World Book Day

2000: Awarded a CBE

2003: Made Non-Executive Director of BskyB

2009: Made a Dame

2013: Random House and Penguin merge. Gail appointed Chair, Penguin Random House UK and member of global Board.

My mother was a strong woman through necessity. She had to go out and find work at thirteen because money was tight and she was the eldest daughter. As a result, a deep work ethic permeated our family and was passed down to me.

I remember my first Saturday job. I was fifteen; I think I must have lied about my age to get it. It was very exciting. This was different to pocket money. There was a tremendous sense of freedom that I could spend the money on whatever I wanted.

I always assumed that I would be financially independent. When my husband and I were first married he was a student again and starting a political career and after that I always had the bigger income. I've never depended, financially, on anyone. But financial independence isn't the prime motivator for me. In publishing, that has been commitment, passion and a belief in the purpose of publishing books that enrich people's lives.

My husband and I led very separate professional lives. He worked in politics. We met at university and later I got on with my work in publishing, and he with his. Emotionally, of course, we were a great support to each other. I greatly miss that now (Philip Gould died in 2011).

I'm always looking ahead, thinking what the next crisis could be. During the last financial crisis (because I've seen a few now!) we published a book by Jim Collins. He put a high premium on 'productive paranoia.' That's something I definitely subscribe to.

Publishing has always had a decent gender balance. Several of our publishing companies are currently run by women. It's not because of positive discrimination, just about removing the barriers to equality and achievement.

I've always been sympathetic to the problems of being a working mother – I would consider going to a school event one of the more important reasons to take the afternoon off.

But at the same time, we do run a company and we have to make that work... If, for example, a majority of senior women in one division all decided to start families at the same time then it could be difficult!

Mobile access creates opportunities for keeping in touch 24/7. If you work with different time zones, you now have access to important information all the time. You might never go to sleep... Switching off becomes near impossible and this is a problem for everyone.

People probably found me more abrupt when the children were young, and that brings its own stresses. I coped by focusing within office hours. I had to concentrate much more intently in the office between nine and six and work after the children were asleep at home. I had much less time for reflection or just talking to people without a specific purpose. I suppose you substitute one stress for another.

I've occasionally been ignored, or perceived with consternation at more conservative all male gatherings. When I was younger, I remember being introduced to a group of senior men in the company and them looking at me with surprise and confusion. But I don't go looking for that reaction. I'm usually too busy. And I don't work in an industry that's known for gender discrimination.

Creative teams are responsible for the success of our publishing group. I hope they understand that I share their passion; I'm not just pushing the numbers around. I believe in what they do.

The thing about the little failures in life is that you learn from them. I hope what I've learnt from the small failures has stopped me committing too many really major ones.

The whole 'superwoman' thing is a misnomer. All working mothers struggle and you get through it however you can. I mentor young women and it's still one of the biggest questions I hear... "Am I being a bad mother?" "Can I cope with juggling the two?" We beat ourselves up. Home based mothers face their own challenges, too.

There's no perfect formula. I know it can be difficult for children to compete with work for their parents' attention and it is important that they always know that fundamentally they come first. It isn't always easy. But women struggle through and they try to make the best of it for themselves and their children and most often, I think, they do.