

**Miriam Gross:** *literary editor and writer*

**1938: Born in Jerusalem**

**1969: Made Deputy Literary Editor of *The Observer***

**1971: Edited a collections of essays, *The World of George Orwell***

**1976: Edited a second collection of essays, *The World of Raymond Chandler***

**1981: Appointed Women's Editor of *The Observer***

**1986: Edited *Channel Four's Book Choice***

**1986: Appointed Arts Editor of *The Daily Telegraph***

**1991: Made Literary Editor of *The Sunday Telegraph***

**2008: Became Senior Editor (and a co-founder) of *Standpoint* magazine**

**2010: Published a paper on primary school education in London, "So Why Can't They Read?," commissioned and introduced by Boris Johnson**

**2012: Published her memoir, *An Almost English Life***

---

**I was born in Jerusalem, where my parents, both of whom left Germany after Hitler came to power, met and married.** They were both lawyers, but of course couldn't practise law in what was then Palestine. After the war, my father was offered a job in an organisation set up by the Americans to compensate victims of Nazi persecution. So my parents moved back to Germany. My mother eventually became a high court judge there. Meanwhile, I was sent to boarding school in England.

**I arrived at Dartington Hall in 1948, without being able to speak a word of English.** It was a progressive, co-educational school based on the principle that children should be as free as possible and that it was much better for them to discover things for themselves, rather than to be taught.

**I wish I had been forced to learn more.** I am grateful to the school in many ways – it completely sidestepped the English class system, so there was very little snobbery and most people were very kind and non-judgemental. But all young children, in my experience, terribly want to learn. If they're told, "Oh well, you can study this book if you want to, or you can go and play," obviously they're more likely to play. Later on, you wish fervently that you'd studied the book.

**I've always been passionately interested in education - many of the world's prejudices could be dissolved by good teaching.** But the world is full of enmities and hatreds because there's so much ignorance. I've done some research into primary schools in London and found the standards of teaching very depressing.

**When I got my first job at *The Observer* in the 1960s, most women on the staff were secretaries as was I,** even though I had a degree (which many of the men in senior positions did not). Women were not taken seriously

– or so I felt – we would soon get married and have children, and therefore had no clout.

**Actually, I felt a bit like that about myself.** Even though my mother was a high-powered career woman and never did any domestic work, I regarded myself as someone who had to find a husband, cook meals and have a baby. I always knew I would do some kind of job, but I didn't have much ambition in any direction at that point.

**When did I discover my ambition? Gradually.** As I progressed through the world of journalism – from secretary to assistant, to deputy and finally to becoming a department editor – I began to realise that I was actually quite good at this work. I enjoyed being in charge and making decisions about what readers of newspapers might find interesting. I liked commissioning and choosing provocative articles and I liked editing them and presenting them and choosing pictures to illustrate them. And, to be honest, I liked being a boss. I'm a bit of a control freak.

**At the same time I've always felt that I was a bit of an imposter.** Like many women of my generation, I didn't think of myself as a serious player. The idea that I was an executive seemed a bit of a joke.

**I do strongly feel – and this is where I differ from a lot of feminists – that it's almost impossible to do a full-time, demanding job and be a mother of young children at the same time.** With a lot of help, and a lot of money, perhaps. But even then, what if your child falls seriously ill? While my children were young, I had a part-time job.

**I didn't particularly like the whole idea of being 'Women's Editor' because I don't think that women's interests should be regarded as separate from men's.** There's also the suggestion, when you have a women's section, that women don't read the rest of the paper – as though they weren't interested in news or politics or business. I didn't want to cater to that sort of attitude.

**I used to commission articles on gender-neutral subjects, such as jealousy or revenge.** We ran a series called 'The Seven Deadly Virtues.' One of the deadly virtues, I remember, was 'equality.' The world of publicity had not yet taken over, so you could run pieces that weren't linked to some current event and you could interview people who were not necessarily promoting their latest film or book. I did quite a lot of interviews with people for no reason other than I thought they were interesting.

**One doesn't know oneself very well.** So when I read things that other people have written about me, [such as the journalist David Sexton saying that I was "fully [myself] all the time in every circumstance in a way few are in their working lives," it's hard to know what to make of it. It sounds very nice. He also said that he learnt how to say, "No," while working for me, which I like. Being able to say no is essential for anyone who is in charge of anything.

**I never felt that I had to act like a man to get on.** Mind you, I've always had quite strong views, possibly to a fault, which for some reason is often regarded as a masculine attribute. And I've always been quite bossy, as many women are. So there's no question of 'acting' like a man.

**I've never had an office persona.** In my experience, working in an office is like being part of a family.

**When I was Arts and Literary editor, I never thought, *we must publish more women in our pages.*** One year, while I was at *The Sunday Telegraph*, someone calculated that our pages had more women than any other book's pages. I was very pleased but it was completely accidental.

**In the 1970s, when I worked for a male editor at *The Observer*, I promoted quite a lot of women who've since gone on to become famous writers.** My then boss, who was not sexist in any way, was nevertheless not particularly interested in promoting women. I think that I was certainly more open to the potential of women writers than he was.

**Nowadays, I think there's almost a bias in favour of women.** A new novel is probably more likely to be published if it's by a woman than if it's by a man. Everyone's trying to advance women all over the place.

**Personally, I don't believe in positive discrimination, certainly not in favour of women writers. I don't even like the Orange prize for women's fiction.** I think it's quite unnecessary and rather insulting to women.

**I've spent my whole life editing other people's writing.** I'm a sort of re-writer. Nearly all pieces of writing can be improved by editing. I've enjoyed doing it. I've never regarded myself as a writer. I think on the whole ambitious writers don't make good editors. They're more focused on their own writing.

**That doesn't mean that I wasn't ambitious.** I very much want to do things well. If there were any mistakes or unclear passages or even misprints in an article I had edited, I would get very upset. I hate things not being as good as they could be.

**I don't think I care very much about fame, but no one is totally uninterested in it.** Very few people don't want a bit of credit or praise. And I did get that, as an editor. I wouldn't have enjoyed my job if no one had ever given me any credit, even though I was very much a secondary figure in the writing world.

**I have recently written a book** – a memoir – myself, and maybe one of the reasons I did it was to show that, actually, I was not incapable of using my own voice.

**I called it *An Almost English Life*,** because, obviously, I have never felt quite English. But, no, I don't think there's anything liberating about being an outsider. On the contrary, I think it's debilitating. The feeling that one doesn't

quite belong is always uncomfortable. I think it makes one weaker. A sense of belonging is a wonderful privilege.

**I am working less these days, but I don't feel very comfortable about it.** I teach once or twice a week, and I occasionally do a bit of freelance journalism but I'm always on the look-out for other tasks. I can't shake off the 'Protestant'(and not just Protestant) work ethic. Having time on my hands feels wrong.

**It's ridiculous really,** because there are masses of things I love doing, reading and painting to name but two. And watching telly. If only it wasn't for the guilt!

#### SHORT EDITED VERSION

---

**I've spent my whole life editing other people's writing.** I'm a sort of re-writer. Nearly all pieces of writing can be improved by editing. I've enjoyed doing it. I've never regarded myself as a writer. I think, on the whole, ambitious writers don't make good editors. They're more focused on their own writing.

**When I got my first job at *The Observer* in the 1960s, most women on the staff were secretaries as was I,** even though I had a degree (which many of the men in senior positions did not). Women were not taken seriously – or so I felt – we would soon get married and have children, and therefore had no clout.

**I've always felt that I was a bit of an imposter.** Like many women of my generation, I didn't think of myself as a serious player. The idea that I was an executive seemed a bit of a joke.

**I do strongly feel – and this is where I differ from a lot of feminists – that it's almost impossible to do a full-time, demanding job and be a mother of young children at the same time.** With a lot of help, and a lot of money, perhaps. But even then, what if your child falls seriously ill? While my children were young, I had a part-time job.

**I didn't particularly like the whole idea of being 'Women's Editor' because I don't think that women's interests should be regarded as separate from men's.** There's also the suggestion, when you have a women's section, that women don't read the rest of the paper – as though they weren't interested in news or politics or business. I didn't want to cater to that sort of attitude.

**I never felt that I had to act like a man to get on.** Mind you, I've always had quite strong views, possibly to a fault, which for some reason is often regarded as a masculine attribute. And I've always been quite bossy, as many women are. So there's no question of 'acting' like a man.

---

**Personally, I don't believe in positive discrimination, certainly not in favour of women writers. I don't even like the Orange prize for women's fiction.** I think it's quite unnecessary and rather insulting to women.

---