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art_{east}: profile

Jenni Murray's career in
broadcasting spans three decades.
Today she is known by millions as
presenter for Radio 4's *Woman's Hour*.

Piers Ford catches up with her
prior to her appearance at the
Essex Book Festival

Never describe *Woman's Hour* as 'an institution' in Jenni Murray's hearing. "I hate it!" she groans. "It makes us sound like the monarchy." And when you pick up the obvious reference, she immediately sees what's coming and stomps all over it: "I don't consider myself as broadcasting royalty, either! In fact, I tend to fight shy of institutions of any kind."

That much is clear. In a 30 year career, she has kicked against a fair number of institutions including certain elements of her long-term employer, the BBC. Her latest book, *That's My Boy* (Vermilion) – she'll be reading extracts at Maldon Library as part of the Essex Book Festival on 16th March – takes on many of the entrenched views that inform received wisdom on raising male children, as well as the theories of scientists and 'experts'.

Even so, it's difficult to find an adequate alternative word to describe a radio programme that is well into its sixth decade and is intrinsic to the fabric of countless listeners' daily lives. And if the rest of us can appreciate a certain majestic quality about Jenni Murray, its regular presenter since 1987, awarded the OBE for services to radio broadcasting in 1999, we're only recognising the hard-earned esteem in which she is held.

She has a quietly commanding presence. The low, soothing voice ("My parents sent me for elocution lessons when I was very small, they didn't want me to talk with a Barnsley accent") is both reassuring and authoritative. There's a touch of theatre, too, when she holds your gaze over the top of the stylish, slightly forbidding spectacles forever perched on the tip of her nose.

Perhaps it's an echo of youthful ambition. She studied French and Drama at Hull University, reconsidering her future when she saw Vanessa Redgrave's *Rosalind*. "I thought, there's no way you're ever going to be as good as that, girl! Think again," she recalls. Working on the school magazine she'd developed a love of words and when Jenni walked into the university's brand new radio studio, the world of broadcast journalism – a combination of performance and writing – appealed instantly.

Careers officers advised her not to even bother applying for the BBC's journalism training course ("They said they'd only take two men, and they'd be Oxbridge graduates. Try studio management instead.") With a blatant disinterest in things technical, she was rejected.

Jenni then worked for the Brook Street Bureau employment agency.

While running its Bristol office she sent herself on a copy-taking job in HTV's newsroom. With two weeks' experience on her CV, she successfully applied for a similar position at BBC Radio Bristol and in 1973, at 23, her foot was finally on the ladder.

From local radio she went to regional television (she became a reporter and presenter for *South Today* in 1978), then to national television with *Newsnight*, which she joined in 1983. Radio 4 lured her as a presenter for the *Today* programme in 1985 and after she had launched the Saturday edition with John Humphrys in 1987, she took the helm of *Woman's Hour*.

Jenni thinks the steadiness of her progress was crucial. "By the time I came to London—and the decision to go to *Newsnight* was important because it gave me real credibility as a current affairs journalist—I'd had lots of experience and made all my mistakes in the regions," she says. "I didn't come too soon. I had genuinely served my apprenticeship."

She doesn't see herself as a broadcasting pioneer for her sex so much as in the vanguard of the changing nature of the types of story covered in news and current affairs. She was asked to present *Newsnight* when the editor spotted her fronting a documentary made by the BBC's Community Programmes Unit about a play that was causing controversy in the wake of the Falklands War. After ten years with the corporation, it was only when she joined the current affairs team that she had her first brush with insidious sexism.

"I'd been incredibly lucky in that all the way through I'd had male bosses who were committed feminists and I never felt that I was somehow second fiddle," she says. "The radio programmes that I'd produced and presented, I'd done with a guy on an absolutely equal basis. When I went to local television, the relationship between my co-presenter and myself was absolutely equal and carefully nurtured by the management. It was really only when I came to *Newsnight* that I encountered that sense of an old boys' club, and I certainly didn't find it later when I moved to the *Today* programme."

She was with the programme for a "tough two years," she says. Women on the team were known as the 'Newsnight Wives'. They, in turn, referred to their male bosses as the 'Upper V', "barely out of their short pants," Jenni remembers dryly. But the memory is tempered by historical perspective: it had only been ten years since the first woman had read the news and current affairs was slow to ring the changes.

Tough as that time was, her influence on the shifting agenda was considerable. When the editor dismissed her suggestion to cover the story of the first Equal Pay for Work of Equal Value case, which concerned a cook at the Cammel Laird shipyard in the north west, she

and her fellow reporter Ian Smith sat down and worked out how many billions it would cost the economy if every woman in a similar position made the same claim.

"I presented the economics to the editor and I was on the next train to Birkenhead, but I really had to fight for the story," she says. "I also did the first film for *Newsnight* in which women who'd been raped appeared. The editor argued that we couldn't show them, but they were happy to talk on camera because they had nothing to be ashamed of. And that was really groundbreaking."

Woman's Hour remains a constant delight to her, because of its breadth. "I've had a ball," she says. "We do make the assumption that because we're women, we should be equally treated, but we're always very careful to acknowledge that women do have huge ranges of opinions and life choices, so we aren't there to promote anyone. Rather, to advocate choice and enable them to make it."

Some issues return with frustrating regularity, none more so than childcare and equal pay. And Jenni says part of *Woman's Hour's* task is both to cover new issues and remind new generations that advances in equal opportunity are relatively recent. "You can't be complacent because it's not all right," she says. "A lot of young women who thought it was all right are now at home with their young children realising how difficult life has suddenly become."

As the mother of two sons herself—both now, happily, past the "grunty, ghastly teenage phase, articulate and funny"—does she wish she'd had access to a book like *That's My Boy* when she embarked on parenthood? Yes. Jenni remembers some of her circle of feminist friends taking pity on her for having to raise "one of the enemy". So a book that celebrated boys' qualities would have been nice.



Radio days: throughout her career, the veteran broadcaster Jenni Murray has battled against various institutions, including certain elements of the BBC. This month, at the Essex Book Festival, however, she will be turning her attention towards her latest book, *That's My Boy* (below)

But despite the flashes of humour this is a serious and much needed volume and Jenni Murray is taking no prisoners on the subject.

"I think boys are having a really rough time at the moment," she says. "There's been a huge shift in the gender landscape for which most of them are completely unprepared. Boys and girls are badly educated about the gender landscape in which they live. So to live in a society that has been completely male dominated until their generation, then suddenly to have to deal with this huge change without any understanding of how and why it happened, why women were so angry, why the shift had to take place, I think is criminal, actually." ☸



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