Her Edit

HER ISSUE | HER VOICE

Issue Twenty-seven
Spring 2019

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editor@heredit.com www.heredit.com
@her_edit

editorial team
Jayne Phenton
Ann Clark

our contributors
Alison Finch
Sim Scavazza

thank you
Melissa Benn
Morgan Lloyd Malcolm
Jacqueline de Rojas

Karen McDonald
Sarah Williams

Front cover picture
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Welcome to Her Edit

Sexual politics and power to women is inherent in every feature this month.

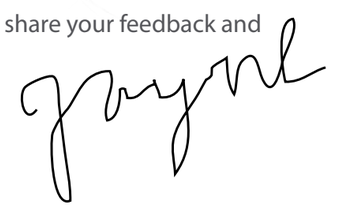
Melissa Benn has a formidable reputation as a writer and campaigner and shares her thoughts on domesticity and the burden of care that women carry. If the 1970s feminism that some of us grew up on seems outdated, then Morgan Lloyd Malcolm's West End hit Emilia, takes the story of a 16th century writer and highlighting the issues and concerns of young women today.

I recommended it to Sim Scavazza who took her teenage daughters and they absolutely loved it. Sim has led an illustrious career in the fashion industry and gives us a fabulously frank and challening account of the drivers behind the 'fast fashion' ethos which is so antithetical to sound environmental practice. Although this is a sector which primarily employs women, it is the likes of disgraced businessman Philip Green who hold the power.

Similarly it seems in the technology sector. There are currently 600,00 vacancies in the tech sector which has huge skills gaps, yet just 15 per cent of its workforce are women. There are fewer women on boards of tech companies than in the city. The incredibly inspiring Jacqueline de Rojas is on a mission to bring more diversity to the industry.

Having recently read Stenhal's book Love, I'm delighted to read about the woman who had a huge influence on him, Germaine de Staël. Alison Finch shines a spotlight not only on a hugely inspiring and fascinating life, but the challenges women still have to confront.

Enjoy the issue and, as ever, keep in touch on social media, and please share your feedback and ideas.



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IMAGES
Clockwise from left: Melissa Benn, Sim Scavazza, Morgan Lloyd Malcolm,
Alison Finch and Jacqueline de Rojas

Melissa Benn is a writer and campaigner. Her journalism has appeared in numerous newspapers and magazines and she is currently a regular contributor to The Guardian and New Statesman.

Melissa has published eight books and is a regular speaker and broadcaster. She has written and presented several Radio Four programmes and has been a guest on the Today programme, Woman's Hour, Saturday Live, A Good Read and the Sky Book Show.

She is an honorary patron of the Cambridge Literary Festival and has spoken at the Hay, Edinburgh, Bath and Cheltenham literary festivals, among many others, and numerous seminars and public meetings on education, feminism and general equality issues.

Melissa was the Chair of Comprehensive Future, a cross-party group campaigning for an end to selective education, from 2014 to 2018. She is on the Council of the New Visions Group, a founder member of the Local Schools Network and a member of the Oxford Women in the Humanities Advisory Board.

Jayne Phenton shared a pot of tea with Melissa to hear about her childhood, writing and women's politics.

Labours of love

MELISSA BENN

I'm reminded of art critic and writer Cyril Connelly's contention, 'There is no more sombre enemy of good art than the pram in the hallway', as writer and campaigner Melissa Benn tells me about the propitious arrival of her family.

'I sold my first novel the day I gave birth to my elder daughter; the paperback came out when I went into labour with my second.'

The diverse range of publications she's written for, Good Housekeeping, Marxism Today and the London Review of Books to mention just three, suggests some indication of the breadth and depth of her character. Given her political heritage, rigorous intellect and successful literary career, I'm expecting she might be very serious and slightly intimidating, but she is delightfully warm, open and good fun.

As well as two novels, Public Lives and One of Us, (she's currently finishing her third) Melissa's non-fiction books include *Madonna and Child: Politics of Modern Motherhood,* published in 1998, and the follow-up, *What should we tell our daughters?: The pleasures and pressures of growing up female*, in 2015.

Both books address the disparate power balance women face in both 'work' and

‘It took quite a time to overcome the idea that politics was everything.’

‘domestic’ life and the weight of expectation on women. Melissa’s own home life seems to have been fairly balanced, but she credits her partner, an analytic psychotherapist, for doing his fair share of housework and childcare.

‘He said he would do half of everything and he never reneged on that. I think that liberated me and I see a lot of women around me who don’t have that. It’s a full time thing when you've got two children under four.’

As a teenager, her great interest was literature and she admired writers who wrote both fiction and non-fiction, such as Simone de Beauvoir and Nadine Gordimer.

‘I knew I was interested in the world and wanted to write about it, but I also really wanted to write stories; I didn’t want to only do one or the other. I didn’t have any idea how you could do both, but in my own way I have done that. It took quite a time to overcome the idea that politics was everything. When I published my first novel I was so embarrassed, but also at the same time quite excited and proud.’

Of course politics has been the air Melissa has breathed all her life as the only daughter of the four children of Labour politician Tony Benn and writer, educationalist and campaigner Caroline Middleton DeCamp Benn. She describes her childhood as ‘very happy’ and ‘informal, with lots going on and a house always full of people and they talked about politics ‘a lot’.

‘I remember my dad coming home late from the House of Commons. He was always busy so my mother really held it all together, but she was also incredibly smart and my father’s greatest advisor. I would hear them late at night talking about things that had happened politically and then he would go to the basement and dictate his diaries.’

Melissa affectionately describes her father as being hilarious, very warm and open with his feelings; he would laugh till he cried.

‘I thought that was a good role model, that you could be effective in the outside world and you could be courageous, but you weren’t hiding your feelings.’

Melissa was keen for her own children to go to local schools like her and her brothers and enjoy the same sort of informal childhood as her own. While she clearly lived the politics of the time, Melissa says she thought a lot of the politics at the time was quite boring and as a teenager she was more interested in friends and her social life.

I wonder whether Melissa inherited her feminist politics from her mother. She

describes her as radical, while the Benn side of the family was more conservative, but inevitably we are products of our time and she perceived the responsibilities of running a home and caring for children as being restrictive for her mother and women of her generation.

‘I decided it was constraining them - although I don’t think they felt that. I thought ‘I don’t want to be defined and told I have to have a woman’s life. I was quite cross and I think that’s right when you’re young and you should influence the older generation. I definitely influenced both my parents and I think it’s fair to say my feminism affected my mother and she would acknowledge that.’

As a teenager, Melissa would argue with her dad about women’s rights and their proscribed roles and launched possibly her first campaign by putting up posters with drawings of her mum doing the hoovering and bearing the legend, ‘fight sexism in the Benn family.’ Her father’s teasing riposte was a series of posters saying, ‘Melissa Benn never does any housework, she doesn’t know what she’s talking about.’

Of course this was the 1970s and the second big wave of feminism, and the concerns of our generation are clearly different to the agenda defining feminist politics for young women today. Issues such as wages for domestic labour seem slightly anachronistic now, but I wonder how much has actually changed.

‘Young women today are are quite angry and finding new problems - which is absolutely right. The whole debate in the 70s, the personal is political and all that, in terms of domestic life, has disappeared. It’s seen as a piece of social history, but my understanding of the figures is that women still largely take on most of the care for children. Men do a few hours more domestic work a week than they used to.

‘This depresses me. The idea of being a good parent has become more and more developed, and in some ways it’s great, but it’s more time consuming. The amount you have to do to be more present with your child and you’re also meant to be amazingly successful and I don’t think anyone is calling out the impossibility of that.’

As people are living longer, the question of care for the elderly - who provides it and who pays for it - is probably one of the pressing socio-political issues of our time and one which is repeatedly being kicked into the proverbial long grass. Women who

We gave Melissa the magic policy wand - these are her three wishes

- As part of a long term move towards creating more socially mixed schools, I would decree that no school, including a private school, that didn't take a significant percentage of the most disadvantaged children could be judged outstanding
- The job of Prime Minister be shared between a man and a woman
- Double the pay of all carers

Read more on Melissa's website www.melissabenn.com

bear the larger part of responsibility of care for teenagers are now also responsible for caring for elderly parents.

'It's all labour of love and is of no interest to policy makers. Care is seen as women's work and nobody gives a damn because it's not sexy. If I've got one more campaign in me, it would be the burden of care and the underpayment of care.

'Compare a situation where you have a relative who dies and the people who sort out their estate - lawyers - sets you thinking. They're earning hundreds of pounds an hour and the people who were caring for their bodily needs are paid £10 an hour. It's not the right balance.

The idea of wages for housework seems to belong to a different era, but the proposition of a citizen's income does have significant support. There is the issue of poor pay for carers - the majority of whom tend to be women - and then women's care within the home.

'The family is the most clever institution in getting women to do work.'

Melissa Benn has a formidable reputation as a campaigner on education. She is the founder of the Local Schools Network, and chair of Comprehensive Future; she was awarded the Fred and Anne Jarvis Award two years ago by the National Union of Teachers (now the National Education Union).

She sees the public/private divide as being at the heart of educational injustice and feels her children's education was much less creative, less progressive and less roaming than her own and her book, Life Lessons: The Case for a National Education Service, written she says 'as a critical friend', is seen as the paradigm for the Labour Party's education policy.

She's not unaware of the irony of her being someone who had the benefit of social capital despite going to the local comp.

'I do a lot of talking about education. I spoke at a meeting in York. There were two other people on the panel. One was a profesor from Cambridge who had originally come from a mining family, and the other speaker had come from a working class background and got to Cambridge. I said, 'I'm the

'The family is the most clever institution in getting women to do work.'

downwardly mobile one, because I've got no story.' Anything I've ever achieved people will say 'what did you expect'. I have worked incredibly hard and I'm not complaining, but I'm saying my narrative is not useful.'

Melissa has a very attractive 'roll your sleeves up' attitude though and was hugely supportive of her own children's school.

'At primary school it was incredibly mixed, but come age 11, many of the middle class children surprisingly went off to private schools or selective faith schools. There were few middle class parents and the school was considered locally to be a bit of a sink school. A few of us said, 'We're going to put our love and our effort and our children there' and I spent seven years trying to support it in whatever way I could. I don't want to be one of those angry parents.

'My mother always said, 'use your anger as jet fuel', so I thought I'd put all my anger into a book. I just don't do unpleasantness, I don't fall out with people and I'm quite proud of the body of work I've created.'

If there is an exemplar of a woman who has a successful and satisfying career, balanced with a contented family life and maintaining a commitment to public service in the local community, then Melissa Benn seems very close to it.

Her drive, passion and influence is impressive, but she has enormous personal appeal as someone who genuinely cares and is without ego. So in the midst of her jet-fuelled life, what does Melissa do on her day off?

'The thing I most like is a day to myself; no email, no phone, read the paper from beginning to end, go for a walk, a swim or a run. We've got this huge sofa, so I get this big pillow and my favourite thing is an afternoon nap. Then I think, 'I could solve Brexit'.

'It would probably involve some alcohol, then someone cooking me a really good meal - I am not a cook - then staying up reading. That would be a perfect London day. It's about having no obligations.'

Sim Scavazza has worked in Buying and Merchandising for High Street Fashion retailers for over 25 years. Starting out as an apprentice buyer for Chelsea Girl, she went on to work at French Connection, then Next, before becoming Managing Director of Miss Selfridge.

She is currently a Governor at the University of the Arts London and Chairs the registered charity Mentor UK. Her passions are the cultural industries and education.

Words by Sim Scavazza

Her Edit

IMAGES
Top: ©EamonnMcCabe
Bottom: courtesy of Mentor UK

The emperor's new clothes

SIM SCAVAZZA

In April 2006 I did something I never thought I would. I resigned from one of the best jobs I had ever had in my life. I was Managing Director for the beloved Miss Selfridge, a brand I adored and which, together with my amazing team, I had spent the last six years turning around. I remember the sadness, but also the relief.

I couldn't bear working for that tyrant Philip Green anymore, especially since the birth of my twin girls Bella and Florence in 2002. I loved Miss S so much that once I stopped breast feeding at six months, I went back to work, leaving my precious girls in the hands of nannies.

I still believed in the High Street then. I'd lived and breathed it since 1989 when I joined Chelsea Girl as trainee buyer. The glory days of product development and Far East low pricing; the exhilaration of catching the trend at just the right time so that clothes flew off the shelves: Fast Fashion had a habit of hitting the right note rendering the new season irresistible. In those days, the trends were clear and concise which leant themselves to consumer interpretation and early adoption. Wonderful unique finds, special fabrics or styles sourced whilst shopping the world's malls. It was all-consuming, exciting, challenging. That was the allure of the High Street to a fashion savvy, spotter of trends and creator of best sellers. So, what went wrong?

Personally, I'd had enough of being sworn at, but concurrently with that, something else was happening. The paradigm was shifting. Some pioneers were beginning to talk about how fashion adversely affects the environment. There were statistics about how much water it took to dye denim and to grow cotton. There were angry claims about workers being exploited in factories around the world.

The consumers weren't listening though, too busy snapping up ever cheaper, more

fashionable clothes to sate their shopping habits.

I was aware of this ethical phenomenon and knew it couldn't be ignored, but I also knew it was going to take more than a few reports to change the narrative at this stage and more importantly, change consumer behaviour.

I was approached by a group of people who had started up an online ethical retailer called adili.com. Funded by VCs and private investors, I also invested and became a non-Exec Director. We thought that we could create the ASOS of the ethical world. We worked with small Indian co-operatives using only natural fabrics. We stocked ethical kids' and women's brands direct from wholesalers.

The founders were from an IT background and thought that the technical platform and the ethical message would see us through, but I tried to explain that women would not change their shopping habits out of virtue. The clothes had to be as fashionable and stylish as the apparel on offer in the High Street and what's more, had to compete on price. But how could we? Small manufacturing runs; ethical, but costly materials, slow hand stitching and a whiff of bohemian morality.

Sales were slow, but initially promising. The only issue was the impossibility of supporting staff, a warehouse and a Head office on slow, low volume sales. We raised more money, pitching to the investors (always men) who had no idea about fashion or ethics - they just wanted to know how much they might make once the company increased its value and was sold off to the highest bidder (it's all about the EXIT).

I learnt so much during that time, meeting ethical pioneers like Tamsin Blanchard, Safia Minney, Livia Firth and Orsola de Castro. We shared ideas and lessons and I began to truly understand what my industry was doing to the planet and, more importantly, what we could do about it.

By 2008 I was heavily involved with the London College of Fashion (LCF), talking at events and lending support wherever I could. The brilliant Pro Vice Chancellor, Professor Frances Corner, and her team decided it was time to galvanise the industry and they went about setting up the Centre for Sustainable Fashion at the LCF.

I persuaded Adili to become a funder and we firmly aligned ourselves to this new faculty in London which explored vital elements and was committed to using fashion to drive change, build a sustainable future and improve the way people live.

The centre is still going strong, researching and teaching students how to embed sustainability in all that they do, not that the Millennials need encouraging! I attended an event there held in conjunction with Kering in Paris at the British Consulate last year. Kering is the only luxury conglomerate (it owns Gucci, Botega Veneta, St Laurent and Balenciaga to name but a few brands) to publish an Environmental Profit & Loss account (EP&L).

This enables it to measure in € value the costs and benefits it generates for the environment, and in turn to make more sustainable business decisions. Gucci was the first luxury fashion house last year to commit to dropping the use of real fur. Ethics is finally making its mark in luxury too.

One of the questions I posed to the ethical fashion industry recently was why had it taken so long for the concept to take hold. Why has it taken so long for the consumer to start taking sustainability to heart?

I asked this of Tamsin Lejeune, the CEO of the Ethical Fashion Forum. She said it was happening slowly, but surely due to the sustained and tireless approach of organisations like hers. Timing is everything in Fashion and we agreed that the David Attenborough Blue Planet series really touched the psyche of the public all over the world as we sat and cried at the whale mother unable to let go of her dead calf, killed by ingesting plastic and other toxins in the ocean.That moment propelled the narrative forward and shed light on the urgency of saving our planet.

‘The casualties will be the likes of Philip Green and other owners of retail empires who peddle cheap, disposable apparel’

It's hard to say when exactly sales started dropping off in the High Street and what caused the gradual erosion of the high volumes enjoyed throughout the 80s, 90s and early 2000s. There is talk of the death of the middle market, for example, Marks & Spencer, because it is being squeezed by ridiculously cheap and definitely unethical competitors. More talk of online shopping taking over as more and more people sit at their PCs or on their phones on the way to work, happily shopping away. There is also talk of clothes just not being that enticing anymore. The sheer weight of the stuff in our wardrobes can seem an encumbrance as more of us find more pleasure in going to the cinema or on holiday.

I believe a combination of all these factors has led to the decline of shopping on the High Street. The charity shops are bulging and landfill gorges on the sheer amount of materials filling them. We simply can't manage any more stuff - the world is groaning and so are we. Behold, the demise of the High Street. Are sales of actual sustainable or ethical fashion garments on the rise — well yes, but those sales don't make up the shortfall for any retailer.

So what else is happening? Consumers are buying less, less often and have stumbled into the world of sustainable behaviour. I believe that true sustainable fashion isn't just about organic or fair-trade; it's about reducing the amount we buy, reducing the amount that the retailers stock and therefore reducing the amount that the manufacturers produce in the first place.

This is sustainable fashion and means the general public – the consumer - have a way to control and manage the waste.

Fashion savvy Millennials and luxury connoisseurs are also disrupting the fashion space with the development of rental sites which are gaining in popularity. Want a dress for that special occasion? Go to the new app Tulerie or on-line at Le Tote, where you can rent one. Why buy when you can rent the latest designs?

At last, through buying vintage, up-cycling, re-cycling, re-using, and renting we can still enjoy fashion without killing the planet. The casualties will be the likes of Philip Green and other owners of retail empires who peddle cheap, disposable apparel, but the price is worth it for our future and our planet.

Find out more about the work of MentorUK on their website https://mentoruk.org.uk/

IMAGE
The cast of Emilia at the Vaudeville Theatre ©HelenMurray

Morgan Lloyd Malcolm is a writer and playwright based in south London. Her sell-out play Emilia, commissioned by The Globe, transferred to the West End after only 11 performances.

Amongst her prodigious output are the hit plays The Wasp and Belongings for which she was shortlisted for The Charles Wintour Most Promising Playwright Award.

She is currently in development for a film of Emilia and adapting The Wasp as a screenplay.

Interview Jayne Phenton

The play's the thing

MORGAN LLOYD MALCOLM

I believe the best theatre leaves you feeling emotionally, intellectually or psychologically a little bit different from when you entered the auditorium. Emilia, which transferred to the Vaudeville Theatre in the Strand, after just 11 performances at the Globe, puts a big fat tick in that box. A tear in the eye? Almost certainly. Burning with indignant rage at the patriarchy? Most definitely.

The all-female production oozes joy, spirit and defiance, channelling the frustration and rage of Elizabethan poet Emilia Bassano into a feminist polemic, which both celebrates women's resilience and talent, and rages at the inequities which persist four centuries later.

Emilia is played by three actresses as we watch her grow from a rebellious girl into an educated and talented woman constrained by the gender inequity of the day, via a forced marriage, three children and her attempts to find an outlet for her writing, when women were only permitted to publish religious texts.

At the heart of the narrative is the premise that she is the 'dark lady' of her lover William Shakespeare's sonnets and her discovery that he has used her writing in his work, claiming it as his own. Some of this is historical fact, some is supposition and some is the creative genius of playwright and writer Morgan Lloyd Malcolm.

It is a delight to meet her. She crackles with positivity and, quite rightly, is enjoying the show's success.

'They've been so many times when I've thought nothing's happening and I'm never going to make any money or write what I want to write, but it feels like it's starting to happen. In 2005 I really started writing on my own, so 14 years later and I'm finally in the West End which is amazing.'

Originally from south London, Morgan grew up in Bath. She studied drama and theatre at Goldsmiths College where she formed Trippplicate with fellow students Katie Lyons, now an actor and director, and Verity Warnough, an actor and writer, now a director.

IMAGE
l-r: Globe Director, Michelle Terry, Morgan Lloyd Malcolm and Emilia Director, Nicole Charles.©HelenMurray

‘I feel very lonely when I’m writing on my own.’

After successful shows at five Edinburgh festivals, Morgan got stage fright and performing wasn’t so enjoyable;

‘[I was] starting to panic about performing so I decided to just stop and focus on the writing.’

She wrote for the Old Vic’s 24 Hour Plays, ‘which really kicked me off on my own and gave me the confidence to think I could do it.’

The Old Vic also provided the fertile ground to create a network of people of similar age – Jenni Maitland and Charity Wakefield who she worked with at that time are now in Emelia - and it fostered Morgan’s love of collaborating and working with other people.

She worked full-time in the day and wrote at night and at weekends, with a prodigious output including writing four pantomimes for the Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith, her own Christmas shows and site specific shows with Katie Lyons.

Morgan is quick to acknowledge that having a supportive long-term partner with ‘a normal job’ has been helpful.

‘I try to be honest about that because I probably couldn’t have done it without his regular wage. I don’t think I’ve ever earned regularly enough to be able to pay into a mortgage or have kids.’

Her first full-length play, Belongings, exploring the experience of a woman soldier returning from war in Afghanistan, was staged at the Trafalgar Studios in London in 2011, and well-received confirming her as ‘an exciting new talent.’

If the birth of her first child, now aged 7, was an interruption to her flourishing career, then it also provided an impetus for her next play. Panicking that she might ‘disappear a bit’, Morgan wrote her next play, the Wasp, when her son was six months old.

‘It came out of the fact that I was a bit tired and a bit miserable and you can feel that in the play.’

The Wasp is a dark thriller about two former school friends – one a victim of bullying, the other her persecutor – who meet years later when their lives are very different. It’s a relatively rare piece of theatre that focuses on two women. There’s a discernible feminist thread in Morgan’s work, but driven by a pragmatic action and ambition to make a tangible difference for other women in the industry.

‘That’s always in the back of mind when I’m writing something, ‘how is this going to employ women in a really fun way?’ As the years have gone by, I’ve recognised I have power as a writer to make decisions in what I write and it’s easy for me.

‘I know my strength is in writing for women. I wrote the Wasp because I wanted to write a meaty two-hander for women realising there’s such an appetite for it. It’s used for the monologues a lot because there are not that many plays out there that do that.’

Both Morgan’s parents are actors, her father also becoming a theatre producer, so there wasn’t much question in her own mind about her future, but she recognises the lack of inclusivity in the theatre.

‘It’s an industry run so much on who you know and on reputation; if you are the first generation to come into theatre that can be terrifying and very hard. Where do you even start?
‘I thought I wanted to be a famous actress, be in movies, but realised I wasn’t that good to be anything special. I couldn’t do auditions – they just scared the hell out of me, but it’s always been in my veins. I felt I’d always go into theatre, it feels like a community to me.’

Collaboration is important to her and Morgan feels uncomfortable with the typically hierarchical pyramid headed by the writer at the top, then moving to director and downwards. Getting other people’s input is a critical part of how she works.

‘There are a few moments where I really love writing, but most of it is just hard labour to get me into a room with actors and designers, because that’s the moment we are creating. Everybody has an equal voice and input. That is the way I prefer to make theatre. I feel very lonely when I’m writing on my own.’

This might account for Morgan’s modus operandi of thinking, reading and preparing a subject for some time until the pending deadline spurs her into action, but Emilia became a labour of love. The Globe’s Artistic Director, Michelle Terry, commissioned the play in 2017 and they both envisioned it as a history play, until they questioned what the history was and sought to revise the white male gaze which defines historical narratives.

‘We wanted to challenge [the idea] that she’s only famous because she had sex with a famous man, which is often how we remember women. Right from the start it was about telling her story properly and reclaiming her position as a writer, as a mother, rather than this random connection.’

Thinking of Emelia as a woman who shared the same hormones, experiences of childbirth, the same frustrations and discrimination as contemporary women, helped Morgan and Michelle to present her story through her own eyes, ‘More of a memory play than a history play.’

There is a feminist backbone running all the way through the play; as Morgan was researching Emelia, the #MeToo campaign kicked in.

‘We kept saying, ‘this is still happening, this is exactly what we’re reading about.’

The contemporary issues have clearly struck a chord with audiences, particularly teenagers, although Morgan was especially moved by a teenage boy who thanked her and said the play had made him cry three times, although, like life, there are buckets of humour and wit.

‘I can’t really write anything without comedy in it. Even in the darkest moments I’ve had, there’s been humour. I am obsessed with funny women and I wanted to write something where women got to show their comedy chops. They don’t get to play men much either, especially funny men, so Emelia is great fun for the actors.’

Morgan is currently working on two films, a new play which is due in September and is developing ‘something’ for television, admitting that a fear of being freelance means she often says ‘yes’ to more things than she should. For now though, she is enjoying Emilia’s success and the recognition.

‘This has been my dream for ages. It’s amazing. I’m so glad it’s this play and this team; it’s been like a mad rollercoaster. It’s what you work for then you think, ‘Fuck! I’m in the West End.’

Saffron Coomber (Emilia 1), Adelle Leonce (Emilia 2) and Clare Perkins (Emilia 3) in Emilia at the Vaudeville Theatre. ©HelenMurray

Alison Finch is Emeritus Professor of French Literature at the University of Cambridge and a Fellow of Churchill College, Cambridge.

She has published widely on French literature; her books include Women's Writing in Nineteenth-Century France (Cambridge University Press, 2000)

Words by Alison Finch

Image right courtesy of Alison Finch

Feminism and romanticism - Germaine de Staël

ALISON FINCH

During her lifetime Germaine de Staël became the most famous woman in Europe. She had social advantages that helped her. She was rich and extremely well connected. The daughter of the chief financial adviser to the French monarchy, Jacques Necker, she married the Swedish ambassador to Paris, the Baron de Staël.

But many women of the time were rich and well connected. What made Staël stand out was her formidable writing talent, her intellectual curiosity, and her passion for politics. She was a feminist, keenly aware of the disadvantaged position of women not only in French society, but all over the world, and she was a humane thinker whose liberal views and cosmopolitanism inevitably brought her into conflict with France's ruler Napoleon.

She enraged him by her defence of women (Napoleon was no feminist) as well as by her works of comparative cultural criticism – which extolled German literature and in effect said to the French, 'We're rightly proud of our own literature, but look, here's a different way of doing things that we can and should learn from.' Napoleon saw this as undermining the prestige of France.

He ordered Staël into exile and for years she had to live far from her beloved Paris, in her Swiss home. There she was visited by some of the most notable thinkers and writers in Europe, and between them they pursued and promoted a liberal political agenda. In the end, Staël was said to have been one of three great powers that had brought about Napoleon's downfall, the other two being England and Russia.

Staël's presence on the political stage already gave her a lasting influence, and today more and more scholars are acknowledging that her literary criticism introduced Romanticism to the rest of Europe and to the United States. Romanticism, with its stress on passionate individualism, has been formative to modern thinking and creative writing. Without Staël, it might have remained largely confined to Germany. Staël also, both subtly and frontally, attacked the notion of 'good taste', which then was inextricably bound up with the idea of 'the aristocratic'; arguably, it is thanks to her that modern art has evolved in the way it has, with its challenges to 'tastefulness'.

Her two main novels Delphine and Corinne (1802, 1807) were hugely popular at the time, translated into English and many other languages and had a profound impact. They raise issues that are still with us like attitudes to disability or the double standards applied to men and women. Thus Staël talks about the greater importance attached to women's physical attractiveness; society's attitude to the aging woman; and whether a woman of genius can be truly loved by a man who may feel threatened by her talent.

Through her novels and other works, Staël shaped contemporary and later writers. First, in France: the great novelist Stendhal (1783-1842) not only took many of his ideas on Romanticism and feminism from Staël, he also derived his pseudonym from her name (his real name was Henri Beyle). French women writers looked on her as a model; Simone de Beauvoir cites her in The Second Sex. One could say that Staël is at the root of modern French feminism, which has spread world-wide via Beauvoir.

Her impact abroad was also enormous. Jane Austen nods to her, giving the villain of her novel Lady Susan the surname Vernon – the same as that of the female villain in Delphine, Madame de Vernon. Maria Edgeworth, Felicia Hemans, Elizabeth Barret Browning all drew on her works. Corinne in particular was a kind of international shorthand for 'the gifted woman'. 'She's another Corinne' – everyone knew what you meant by that. The American writer and reformer Margaret Fuller was known as 'the Yankee Corinna'. Then there were paintings of Corinne as muse and Sybil, often depicted with the face of Staël herself, and known across Europe. All this promoted an image of female creativity.

One especially notable influence occurs in George Eliot's The Mill on the Floss (1860). The difference between the dark-haired, lively, clever Maggie Tulliver and her rather insipid cousin Lucy directly harks back to the contrast between the dark Corinne and her blonde half-sister, similarly named Lucile. Maggie refers to Corinne about half-way through The Mill on the Floss, saying that she, Maggie, is on the side of 'dark unhappy' heroines; she doesn't want any more books where 'blond haired women carry away all the happiness'. Maggie is clearly George Eliot's Corinne, and once Maggie has grown up, that hair of hers, her coronet of black hair, becomes regal, just as Corinne is the artistic 'queen' of Italy.

This theme of the lively brunette and the contrasting half-sister reappears in Victorian literature. For instance, in Wilkie Collins's The Woman in White (1859), the dark-haired half-sister, Marian Halcombe, even has a moustache (shock, horror), but she too has courage and a lively intelligence. There are many half-sisters in Victorian literature – it has been said that they are all Corinne's progeny. The influence goes on, perhaps even in Bob Dylan's Corrina, Corrina!
Each of us probably owes something to Staël and to the gradual acceptance of her ideas.

If you want to know more, you can go to the podcast of BBC's In Our Time on Staël, broadcast on 16 November 2017.

IMAGE
Portrait of Germaine de Staël (1766-1817)
by François Gérard (1770–1837)

Jacqeline de Rojas is the President of techUK, the body representing 900 companies in the technology sector.

She began her career in the tech industry with software company Synon, going to work for blue chip software companies notably becoming Managing Director of Informix in 1999 and then Sage in 2016.

She joined the board of techUK in 2013, becoming President in 2015 with a focus on greater diversity in the sector, particularly women. She advises the Girl Guides on attracting girls into STEM subjects and in 2018 was appointed a CBE for services to international trade in the technology industry.

Interview by Ann Clark

Technically speaking

Jacqueline de Rojas

You've said that your childhood was unhappy - first living above your father's Chinese restaurant and then on a Council Estate in Swindon. Can you tell us how that has formed and influenced you and how and where did you seek refuge?

'Give yourself the space to be the person you want to be versus the person everyone else wants you to be.'

I am half Chinese and was born in Folkestone in Kent. My older brother and I had a really challenged childhood. Our Chinese father was a wife-batterer, drank too much, was a tax-evader and bigamist. Mum had a black eye every week. I spent my childhood deliberately trying to be insignificant so that I was not the target of his violence

We were given money by our very kind Catholic priest, Father Walmsley to flee and we headed for Swindon to our grandparents. A few years later my mother remarried my step-father, which was good for her but not so great for us. He was not what I would describe as a very fatherly figure.

We didn't have much of anything, family life was not picture perfect by any means but if it taught me anything, it taught me resilience, to become self-sufficient and extremely resourceful. I personally found great solace in the structure and rewards of school life; to this day education and opportunity remain important to me as I have raised and guided our own children.

My husband is incredibly talented and creative. He came from the tech industry but retrained as a yoga teacher and encourages me to be consistent with my practice of yoga and meditation - that is where I get my balance and strength. We have three kids, a grandson, two dogs and a very happy balance of family life and love.

You have said that you and your brother were bullied at school. How did you cope with that?

I didn't realise I was half-Chinese until I got to school. Our family name was Yu, which whilst very common in Asia was not so common at the Catholic schools, we found ourselves in. In the early days the name calling was incessant and

IMAGE
Jacqueline de Rojas
©GarethCatermole/Getty Images

hard to cope with. In the end we blocked it out as white noise.

I just decided that I could either be beaten by it or find a way to succeed in an alternative way, so I buried myself in the things I loved which were languages and netball.

Interestingly when I did eventually get my O Level results (GCSE in today's nomenclature), my step-father asked me, 'What have you got there?' and when I told him it was my results, he took the envelope, looked at the results and said, 'What are you trying to do, are you trying to show me up?'

To this day I don't know whether he meant this sarcastically or not, but he wasn't an educated man and the impact on me was initially devastating, although not unexpected. It really was a defining moment for me. I decided that I was going to show him how much potential I could unlock, and I suppose the lesson here is that there is always a miracle if you look hard enough. That small interaction has been the reason I have worked hard all my career to make something of myself. Role models are not always positive, but they can be the reason for positive outcomes!

Who are the most important role models in your life and why?

I am a great believer that you are a role model whether you choose to be or not and I have been influenced by really positive role models like my mum, who sadly now suffers from dementia and sliding ever more into someone that is a shadow of her former self. She was selfless and loved unconditionally. I strive to exercise the kind of tolerance and patience that my husband practices all day every day and our children are an inspiration to us both. They are incredible people and it is certainly true that the young have so much to teach us.

Of course, I aspire to be as generous and as impactful as so many of the #Sisterhood and the #Manbassadors that I am surrounded by in the UK tech scene. Every day I witness the work of incredible people like Vanessa Vallelly OBE, Amali de Alwis MBE, Simone Roche MBE, Sherry Coutu CBE, Sheila Flavell COO at FDM, the everywoman team Maxine Benson MBE and Karen Gill MBE, Dame Helena Morrissey DBE, Baroness Martha Lane Fox, Anne-Marie Imafidon MBE, Sue Black OBE, Russ Shaw at London Tech Advocates, Janet Coyle, Priya Guha, Jack Parsons, Neil Milliken, June Angelides, Rav Bumbra and so many many more. They wake up every morning and worry about diversity and inclusion.

Given that technology is still not popular with women, what made you take a career in that field?

My career aspiration was originally to be a newscaster for the BBC. However, as I returned from a degree in European Business from Germany in 1986, I needed to earn money reasonably quickly, so when I was offered a job by my brother-in-law to join his company as a recruitment consultant in a very young but burgeoning technology sector, I grasped it with both hands and very much enjoyed it. I stayed there for a couple of years and was invited to join my largest client. They had an international operation that needed a German-speaking leader, so having graduated with a degree in European Business and lived in Germany for some time, the combination of my language and business skills made me invaluable to manage their partner channel internationally! Did I choose technology? I rather feel it chose me…

What prejudice have you experienced as a woman?

I do recall a tricky moment when being introduced to one of my clients as the new managing director by one of my team. He had his back to me, and as he turned around with great excitement and anticipation only to be entirely disappointed when he saw me. He couldn't stop himself exclaiming, 'Oh my God, you're a woman!' to which I replied with a smile on my face, 'Oh my goodness, I didn't realise I needed a penis to make a decision! But let's discuss that over lunch…' I have always found that humour has helped me to diffuse awkward scenarios and often use it to counter what could escalate into unnecessarily difficult outcomes.

I would say that the biggest challenge has been promoting the case for women to be viewed as equals in the workplace and being promoted based on performance. There is a toxic combination of unequal opportunity and unequal pay, which creates a downward spiral. Add to that the lack of affordable child care and inflexible working hours and the playing field is definitely stacked against women. Female representation on FTSE 100 boards has increased from 12.5% in 2011 to 23.5% in 2015 and is growing as a result of the data and recommendations emanating from the Hampton-Alexander Report. At the time of writing there are still companies in the FTSE 100 which do not yet have any women on their boards. So, whilst things are changing, you could argue that sexism is still holding back over 50% of the population from reaching the very top and that is not to mention all other minority groups that are severely under-represented in tech.

Given the slow increase in the diversity of the talent pool and the increasing use of algorithms that dictate whether you get that university place, that mortgage or even that job interview, we must strive to have minority voices in the design, testing and implementation teams when building our digital world.

Less than one in four women work in technology. Why do you think there is such a gender imbalance and what can be done to redress it?

Have a read of Invisible Women by Caroline Criado-Perez. She eloquently outlines the examples of how we live in a world inherently built for men and not for women. Her examples, which are not just from the tech world, will shock you and it then becomes clear why gender imbalance persists.

Of course, we do not make it easy for women to sustain leadership positions, so I would encourage flexible working and insist that all short lists are diverse. Plus let's have job

descriptions written with both genders in mind! And whilst I am at it, the rise of women does not mean the demise of men. This is about equalling the playing field and creating a world that works for everyone.

Less than one in ten women are in leadership roles in your industry. What can be done to improve that? What do you think women can bring to those leadership roles?

Personally, I would have all companies sign up to the Tech Talent Charter so that they all have someone who creates a culture to drive diversity and inclusion at all levels. It also ensures transparency of their progress because it urges them to share data of how diverse they are becoming.

We must have more women in leadership levels who are advocating on behalf of other women. Sponsorship of women into senior roles by men has become an imperative because women will only believe that leadership roles are possible if they can see other women succeeding at the top. There is no doubt in my mind that fish rots from the head down.

What have been your greatest triumphs?

There have been so many things to celebrate throughout my career. I have so many people in my life that I am grateful for and so much support to be thankful for. I rather think that being nominated for a Queen's honour in 2018 was my major highlight for that year. Prince William was as charming as you would expect a prince to be.

This year, 2019, my highlight was being asked to record Desert Island Discs for BBC Radio 4. I believe that if you want to change the world, change the narrative and to that end storytelling really matters – I love the work of broadcasters and sharing my story provoked so many people to share their stories with me too. It is an incredible honour to hear reflections from other people's lives and to know that I am not alone in feeling the things I feel and experiencing the life that I have had. We all have a story, don't we?

...and your greatest disappointments?

My incredible fear of failure means that I spend a huge amount of time preparing for successful outcomes. So on the rare occasions that something doesn't turn out quite as I would have wanted it, I tend to view it as a learning experience, so it never really manifests itself as failure. There is only ever two options in my world: success or learning

When you are away from work how do you like to relax?

My husband is a big believer in making time for health. He always tells me that if you don't make time for your wellbeing now, later in life you will have to make time for illness. As a family we choose to live well, to take time to create space through meditation, yoga, exercise and through connection with friends and extended family.

I suppose I would also add that I live a very choiceful life. Work doesn't feel like a burden. I feel happy doing the things I choose to do, which is always informed by diversity and inclusion in tech.

As for hobbies, we always have complex jigsaws on the go at home – the current one being a 12,000-piece monster and which I find incredibly soothing. I am an aspiring saxophonist, but not getting very far!

IMAGE
Jacqueline de Rojas with Desert Island Discs host Lauren Laverne ©BBC

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