

Ahead of her time



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How a One-Woman
Startup Became a
Global Publishing Brand

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ONE

MY FIRST JOB

Some people come into the world and are recognized from an early age as born entrepreneurs; others are hewn and shaped by the circumstances of their lives. In my case, I started with a strong advantage. From an early age, I was programmed by my parents to have a career. Not just any career, either, but a brilliant and successful one. No one in my family suggested how this might be achieved, as there was nothing for which I showed a particular talent. There was also a very mixed message attached to this powerful parental vision for my life. My brilliant career would need to come to an end on the day I walked down the aisle. My mother had given up her job in order to put her exceptionally good organizational talents to use in the home – and so, it seemed, would I.

My parents, Ralph and Estelle Assersohn, met and married just after the Second World War. Both were in their thirties, and their views about life and child-rearing were somewhat Victorian. My younger sister, Rosalind, and I were brought up to be seen and not heard, and to be “good little girls”. My parents always wanted the best for us and I never doubted that they loved and cared for me as much as they were able. However, although I would always think of my childhood as a happy one, it wasn’t because I had a close relationship with either of them or with my sister. I often felt like a cuckoo in the nest and that I disappointed my parents by failing to behave in

the conventional ways they expected. I was, in their eyes, fairly wilful and in their quest for the “perfect daughter” they didn’t know how to respond to the freedom-loving rebel in me, which was a regular cause of disappointment for everyone.

My father, who was employed as the managing director of a small building firm, was definitely not a man suited to entrepreneurship. My mother, intense and highly strung, was typical of the generation that American women’s activist Betty Friedan wrote about in *The Feminine Mystique*: dissatisfied housewives frustrated with the limitations of their lives and needing to find personal fulfilment outside the home. My mother was a highly capable woman with a good brain, who would have been a wonderful entrepreneur had she been born in a different era or married to a different man. When I was older, I would think of her as a “professional housewife”, as every activity to which she turned her hand was completed in the most accomplished way. I had also recognized that none of it had been sufficient to contain her unconscious frustrations.

This was possibly the main reason I decided that being a stay-at-home wife and mother was not for me. It wasn’t destined to be plain sailing from the start, though, and my brilliant career began with a jolt. While I had always been a voracious reader, as a teenager I also spent a good deal of time away from home, socializing with friends in the North West London suburbs where I lived. Partly as a result of my partying, I failed to get the grades I needed for university and was duly sent off to learn shorthand and typing. My mother had always stressed that every woman needed to have some money of her own and I needed to be suitably equipped to earn it.

My first job was working for the production manager at John Murray, a venerated 200-year-old publishing company based in a gracious house in Albemarle Street, on the corner of Piccadilly. I was a fast typist, though not always an accurate one. Luckily, in this job, I was only required to type short notes to the printers, while I endeavoured to get my head around some of the obscure production terminology. Sometimes I was asked to fill in on

reception and take the calls on the old-fashioned switchboard, where I would plug in wires to different extensions. "I'm putting you through now," I would say, with the earphones over my head. It was hard to imagine that this would be the start of my brilliant career.

Realizing that book production was not something which interested me, I searched out a different job in publishing. My next position was working as a secretary in the publicity department at Cassell, another venerable English publishing company, founded in 1848. From there, after only a few months, I applied for the post of assistant publicity manager at the company Robert Hale, which looked like a step up. I got the job, which turned out to be great fun. The publicity manager, John Gittens, had been in his role for over twenty years and was happy to sit at his desk and let me do the running around. Robert Hale published a range of non-fiction and very downmarket commercial fiction. My job consisted of basic publicity skills, sending out review copies, arranging interviews and learning to understand budgets and when it would be appropriate to spend money advertising a book.

John also asked me to take literary editors at the major London newspapers out to lunch, where I was to tell them about our new books. He had been doing it for twenty years and thought the middle-aged male editors might pay more attention to a lively young woman. I had a generous expense account, a ready smile and I was always eager to learn more about the world of books and publishing; so it was both a delicious and terrifying surprise to find myself, at the tender age of twenty-one, wining and dining some of the most erudite and knowledgeable people in the literary world. Totally out of my depth, of course, but so young and ignorant that people forgave my lack of knowledge and I was able to secure occasional attention for some of our titles.

It was here, at Robert Hale, that I enjoyed my first taste of entrepreneurship. I asked to become a reader for the company in my spare time and was paid three guineas per book. It was the

first time I had had to form my own opinions about commercial fiction, and although my advice was not always taken, it was useful nonetheless – as was the extra income, as I was only earning £20 a week.

After about a year, still concerned at my low salary and continuing lack of status, I felt something needed to be done to further my brilliant career – so, on the side, I started a small literary agency with the managing director John Hale’s secretary, Gill Boyd, a competent young woman around my own age. The impetus for this venture had unconsciously come from my parents. At the age of eleven, I had bypassed a year of school when I won a scholarship to a local private school, South Hampstead High, and as a result of that achievement, the concept of the brilliant career I was going to have had been deeply instilled into me. I was later to appreciate that, even at this young age, in my early twenties, and in spite of not having any idea how the commercial world worked, I was already starting to look for “the edge” – the elusive opportunity that was going to lead to the mysterious great achievement that would, hopefully, make my long-suffering parents proud of me at last.

Gill and I agreed verbally to divide any proceeds between us 50/50, but we did not know anything about starting a business and had no idea how little we really did know. As far as I can remember, we did not even know enough to draw up a written agreement between ourselves, let alone make a business plan, define our vision or create our goals. We printed some headed notepaper and opened a bank account together (it was very easy to do that in the 1970s), into which we put a very small amount of money, which we quickly spent on taking out an advertisement in an appropriate publication. Authors began to send us material, and one writer sent us a few short stories which we effortlessly sold to the *Evening News*. We were sent a few novels to read and returned most of them, although there were one or two we liked. We were wondering how to go about submitting them to publishers when I received a letter from an

editor at Constable Books, inviting me out for lunch to discuss what we had to offer them.

It was at that point I realized the game was up. I knew I didn't want to go to lunch and have a conversation about what we were doing. As Gill and I weren't really sure ourselves where we intended to go with this particular venture, we decided that we should perhaps give up this particular dream until we had both learned more about the publishing industry. (Strangely, this first entrepreneurial venture did end up making a profit. The local branch of our bank made a mistake and paid us a small sum of money that had not been generated by either of our efforts. In spite of our honesty, they insisted the error was not theirs.)

I decided at this point that I would look for a job in a real literary agency and learn how the agency side of publishing worked. It was 1971 and I was about to get married, something that in no way put me off my career stride. I had met my husband-to-be, Brian Piatkus, some years previously at a party given by a work colleague. He was a few years older than me and a clever man. He was a clinical chemist, working in an NHS hospital and studying part-time for a master's degree. We had little money between us but we seemed to share common values and sparked each other off in a lively way. I bade a fond farewell to my lovely boss and went off to become a literary agent with a salary rise to £25 a week.

Rupert Crew Associates was run by two delightful middle-aged ladies, Doreen Montgomery and Shirley Russell, both very experienced agents who had worked together for many years. They got on well and laughed a lot, and I remember the atmosphere in the office as being rather jolly. Their major clients were Barbara Cartland, the romance writer, and Cecil Beaton, the Oscar-winning stage and costumer-designer who was also a distinguished fashion, portrait and war photographer. It was a small company and I would have a chance to learn everything that was going on. But there was a catch I hadn't foreseen. A lot

of my time was spent typing letters and long contracts – but my typing was simply not good enough. In those days of manual typewriters and no correcting ribbons, every mistake was one too many, especially on a contract with its many clauses. After my three-month trial period, I was told that I would have to leave. I hadn't enjoyed all the typing, but I had started to learn about the business of being a literary agent and, with my naturally optimistic nature, had assumed that my skills would improve with all the effort I was putting in. This was not simply a blow to my self-esteem: my husband and I needed my salary to pay the mortgage each month. There was no time to waste. I had to find another job.

David Higham Associates was another old and established literary agency in the London publishing world at that time. It had been founded by David Higham in the 1930s and by the time I became his secretary he was in his late seventies; a tall, commanding presence with a head of white hair and a certain abruptness of manner. He had had so many secretaries in his time that he had long ago stopped worrying about badly typed letters. Whenever I made a mistake, he simply crossed it out and scribbled the correct word over it. He would arrive in the office each morning in a taxi from his home in Keats Grove, Hampstead, and would dictate letters and memos before lunching every day at his own special table at L'Etoile restaurant in Charlotte Street. Sometimes he would invite one of his prestigious authors to lunch with him, such as Eric Hobsbawm, A. J. P. Taylor, James Lees-Milne – the agency client list was a roll call of some of the greatest writers, historians and thinkers of the century. Unexpectedly I had found myself a job at the heart of publishing.

Because David Higham's hours in the office were limited, he couldn't always find enough work for me to do. So when a fairly new company, White Lion, approached the David Higham agency to ask if they could reprint some of the out-of-print books from the sizeable agency backlist (the range of books they had sold to publishers over the years, which they

continued to look after for their authors), I asked if I could research which of the older titles might be suitable. Over several months, I scoured the agency's list of living authors and literary estates, and sourced a range of ancient hardback copies, which I offered to White Lion for reprinting. They bought a fair number and suddenly I was earning money for the agency. I was given a rise to £28 a week – for which I hadn't thought to ask – and was told that if I came across a new author who would be a suitable client for the agency, I would be allowed to represent him or her. I was also given some anonymous typescripts to read and comment on, to assess my literary judgement. Very soon, I realized that literary fiction wasn't entirely my thing, as I didn't enjoy some of the novels I was asked to read and was shocked to discover they had been written by very eminent novelists. I began to doubt that being an agent was for me.

I managed to commission one successful book for David Higham, though, before I decided to leave the agency. The author was an agony aunt for a popular newspaper and my mother was a friend of her sister. I wrote to ask if she would like to write a book – she hadn't written one before – and she agreed to become a client of the agency. My legacy to David Higham Associates was a book published in 1975 by Marjorie Proops, doyenne of agony aunts, whose column *Dear Marje* in the *Daily Mirror* had made her a household name.

I never did discover how to become a literary agent because an entrepreneur avenue opened just then, and I seized it. Edwin Buckhalter, with whom I had been dealing at White Lion, and I decided to set up our own company together, a bold and brave venture, but this time I had much more understanding of what was involved.

Suddenly my career was on the up. I was going to be my own boss.