

## JANE CHOLMELEY

*Clare (C) interviewing Jane (J)*

### Extract 1: 3.12 - 6.33

#### THE BIRTH OF SILVERMOON BOOKSHOP

J: ... and the only thing we knew about was the book trade and we didn't have enough money to start a publishing company because that needs much more capital and much greater length of time before the money starts to flow back in, so we said "Well, let's open a bookshop." And it was just so naive of us. It was just ... I mean, nothing like ignorance to make you brave. We thought "That's a good idea, we could do that!" We had no experience whatsoever, erm, and it was scandalously bad because we basically in our heads had de-skilled the whole notion of bookselling by thinking that we, as a couple of publishers, rank outsiders, could just do this. But hey, we were young and we thought "That's a good idea, let's do that."

So we began to work on it and erm, we made business plans and we looked around and we ... erm, thought about how to raise the finance, and we spent every weekend out in London with the dog walking up and down streets to find a ... um, an empty shop and stuff, and that was a pretty dampening experience in every which way because basically um, you couldn't as a non-business, particularly as a female, just bright-eyed bushy-tailed non-business, you couldn't actually get access to the estate agents that were letting the shop premises. They just wouldn't look at you. If you hadn't already got a business. You could have opened the 54th branch of Oddbins, but you couldn't just sort of go and say "I want to open a shop". They just wouldn't talk to you.

So that was a bit depressing, and then we got amazingly lucky because it was in the ... in the sort of dog days of the GLC, and a friend phoned us up and said "Have you seen that the GLC is advertising three shop units on the Charing Cross Road, for bookshop use only?" And we thought "Wow!" And what the GLC were doing was they wanted to restore the Charing Cross Road to bookshop use and they gave, I think it was a 10% discount, it wasn't more, so it was pretty near market rates, and they invited people who wanted to be booksellers to apply for one of the leases and we applied and we got it. And also, the thing that we really wanted to do was – and this isn't being rude to Sisterwrite or anybody else, we wanted to open right in the middle, because we wanted to make a statement about women being important and women having the best. So it wasn't ... we didn't want to open in a sort of outer borough, we wanted to say, you know "51, 51% of the population - We're here, we're good and we absolutely deserve to be in the centre of things".

### Extract 2: 28.26 – 30.43

#### COLLECTIVE PRINCIPLES v CAPITALIST HIERARCHY IN BOOKSELLING

J: ... but, you know, an awful lot of erm, radical bookshops worked on collective principles, job sharing, job rotation, and were not very commercially efficient, and we ... we blundered our way through that. I mean, when we started, we did job rotation, and it was hell, and the worst thing about it is we would change each job every fortnight. You'd be taken off something you liked and were good at, put on something you didn't like and were bad at, but that wasn't the point. The point was it ended up being ludicrous for the customers. So, for example, you get a customer come in and they'd order a book, and they'd give the order to Suzanne, and then by the time erm, their book was ready for collection I'd be handling customer service, and the handover hadn't been complete, or the piece of paper had been lost, so we were making an absolute mess of our customer service by attempting this erm, collective principle.

C: And also, presumably people ... other people weren't as good at accounts as you were?

J: No, so you then have to go back and do them all over again! And because we came up with this sort of phrase, because everybody was trying to do everything, nobody did anything. You'd spend hours debating what sign should be over a certain section of the books, and then you'd turned round and nobody'd got any stamps, because nobody had been to the post office, and you could just sort of see that because we were trying to do something which we thought was good and we sort of believed in, that it ... it actually didn't function, and it made the shop ... it weakened the shop, and it weakened what we wanted to offer to the customers. So I can't remember how long we did that for but we gave it up eventually, and we went back to a standard hierarchy.

### **Extract 3: 43.17 – 49.40**

#### **POLITICS BEHIND THE SILVERMOON CAFÉ**

J: ... we hoped that the café would be a means that regular folk who worked in offices would come in for lunch. That never happened because they thought it was a den of lesbian iniquity – which it was! Oh my God, I could have run a dating agency out of that café, I tell you! One of the best times was, we had some trouble in the bookshop and we had to call the police. This was not an infrequent occasion, although we didn't call the police very often. and erm, this very cute WPC decided that she was going to er ... patrol our café on a Saturday afternoon, all afternoon! (*Laughs*) She was having such fun!

C: And everybody else left?

J: No, everybody else was down there! Dyke in uniform? Wow! (*Laughs*) Thank you!

C: What was ... when you say trouble, was that about men? Or ... what sort of trouble would kick off?

J: We had two aspects of trouble. One was just general hostility and one was, what I call in a rather grand way, state sponsored. The general hostility – I mean, I knew that we weren't going to be the most popular women in town, but I have to say I was deeply

shocked at the level of hostility we had. I mean, I had books thrown at me. Men would come in and shout at us. Hostility from women was really hard to cope with ...

C: What were they complaining about?

J: They were complaining about the women only café. You know, you've got The Garrick round the corner, which is a publishing and media industry club which is ... still doesn't let women in as full members, and we had a 24 seater little café, and they could not cope with it. The idea of women only space was an absolute anathema.

C: Were men allowed in the bookshop?

J: Men were allowed in the bookshop, absolutely. Because what's the point of having politics if you're not trying to convert? Erm ... and we had oh, lovely little things like some guy wanked off on the carpet downstairs. One of our customers was subject to a knife attack. Erm, we had an arson threat from an Islamic group saying that we should be burnt down and sent back to the kitchen. Erm ... it was ... it was startling. I was really, really shocked. So on occasion we did have to call the police.

C: Wow.

J: And people forget, you know? They ... all we were doing was setting up a commercial enterprise, except we weren't. Oh, and the café was hilarious, going back to that, because we made it nice, and we got a wonderful woman supplier, and all of us hated working in the café because it was underground and it was slightly damp, and you always ended up getting a cold, and one of the extraordinary thing was people treated you differently in the café. Upstairs somebody would come up to you and say, you know "Jane, can you recommend me a book, or whatever, that you've read recently?" or "I need something on this," and you'd have a conversation, and you'd do your customer service bit. You'd then changed shift, go down on to the café and the same person would come down and say, not looking at you "Coffee please." And you thought "Thanks a bunch." You know? I've now gone into a different service role and I'm being treated like shit and I have to say we all were so distressed about this, you know, good feminists who were coming in and treating you like shit, and they would say "This is a women's organisation, I thought it would be cheaper." Yeah. And you thought "OK, this has been specially made for you by a nice woman caterer. Do you want me to pay my staff less because we're women? I don't think my landlord's going to give me a discount because this is a women's enterprise." And we got it all the time.

So when we closed the café we were not unhappy. Oh and the other thing about the café was hilarious. We wanted it to be licensed because it was a good way of making money, and we had to apply for a license from the City of Westminster and this has to be done with a solicitor, and unfortunately the solicitor we got was an idiot, and we went along I think it was probably the last time I ever wore a skirt, and I put on my best coat and went along. We looked terribly respectable.

We took Harriet with us from Virago, Managing Director of Virago, with us, as a character witness, and erm, the whole licensing hearing was full of wide boys getting licenses for

gaming machines with “Hey, your honour!” And they were just sort of renewing and then up steps us, like a couple of innocents and erm ... we’d had the locked liquor store inspected by a wonderful woman from the council who rushed up the ladder in her skirt and checked the lock, and that was fine and then they said “Well what about the toilet facilities for your restaurant and café?” So we said, yes, “We’ve got a toilet”. And they said “Well, you haven’t got two toilets, one for men and one for women.” We said “No we haven’t because it’s a women only space, it’s a private club.” ‘Cos you had to make it into a private club for it to be legally women only, and erm, they turned us down, and the reason they turned us down was that they could not believe that, at some later date, we wouldn’t want to let men, and therefore we’d need a second toilet and therefore we didn’t have one.

C:      So, they were just anti-gay?

J:      Yup. So basically that was the demise of the café, because it wasn’t making money and we couldn’t get the license to help it make money.