

# Doris and Me

ERNA PARIS

*L'auteure revoit la première rencontre avec Doris Anderson à son bureau pour une entrevue. Doris l'a engagée et est devenue son mentor et professeure dans les recherches sur les articles étoffés qu'elle lui assignait. Doris l'a aidée à former une approche à l'écriture et a lancé sa carrière d'écrivaine.*

For more than a decade before we met in 1971, *Chatelaine* had been quietly revolutionizing the lives of Canadian women. Doris Anderson was in the process of transforming a traditional women's magazine and its traditional 1950s content (how to cook tuna casseroles and iron men's shirt collars with starch) into an issue-driven publication that was frankly undermining the longstanding "rules of engagement" that governed the place of women in society. That decade, the 1960s, were the years when I married, had children, and, in spite of a high-powered education, found myself steered into a life of full-time housewifery, a career I initially accepted as inevitable. Although Doris was already commissioning ground-breaking articles, and writing controversial editorials calling for more women parliamentarians, among other things, my own awareness of women's inequality was precipitated by reading Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* and Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*. I remember Friedan's depiction of society's carved-in-stone low expectations for women. Her words made me gasp with recognition. She called the unspoken malaise experienced by millions of us "the problem without a name."

I hesitated, then made a personal choice; and by 1971 I had written two magazine articles, one of which had miraculously won a prize from the Media Club of Canada. Thrilled by this unexpected triumph, I decided on the spot to become a professional writer. But writers had to publish and I had few contacts.

That's when I screwed up the courage to place a call to the editor of *Chatelaine* magazine. Doris answered her own phone that day. I strained to decipher her tone; it sounded friendly. I remember stammering that I had just won an



*Doris at the helm, 1970s.*

award and I would like to be a writer and, uh, might she perhaps be interested in meeting me? I truly expected that my audacious "cold call" would elicit a cool rejection, but with the generosity I would later learn to love, she invited me to come to her office the next day.

If recollection serves me well, the *Chatelaine* workplace occupied part of an entire floor of the Maclean-Hunter building in Toronto, at the corner of Dundas St. and University Avenue. One walked through doors into a circular open space flanked by private offices. Someone directed me to Breda Harding, the editor's receptionist, whose desk fronted the large corner room that belonged, I presumed, to Herself. I was ushered inside. Sitting behind a huge desk, busily painting her fingernails scarlet-red, sat an attractive broad-faced woman with dark hair that curled around her face. "Hellooo," she said in a flat drawl I did not recognize (I had never travelled west of Ontario).

“Please sit down.” She smiled.

I can’t remember the details of our conversation, but I do recall that she put me at ease—and that I was too naïve to realize that I had been expected to bring a few article ideas to the meeting. All the same, I walked out with an assignment: *Chatelaine* was sending me to Calgary—*on expense account, no less*—to research a piece on “new volunteer work for women.” The story was pure Doris: take an established women’s activity—volunteer work—and stand it on its head. The “new” volunteer work I was sent to explore involved neither fundraising,

of my children to summer camp and the deadline for payment was fast approaching. I proposed a profile on a monetarily successful Canadian author who was ignored by her peers because she wrote what some people thought were pot-boilers. It wasn’t exactly a Doris story, but she understood my situation in a flash. She accepted without hesitation. I knew it was a gift.

The parties in her Rosedale house were legion, and all her authors were invited, having been transformed into personal friends. The amount of alcohol offered and consumed was equally legendary. At one time Doris rather

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hospital auxiliaries, nor symphony committees, but resettling teenaged runaways and child prostitutes. Talking to these committed volunteers and the children they were trying to help revolutionized *me*; they opened my eyes to a social issue I had never thought about.

For the entire decade of the 1970s, until I turned to book writing, Doris was my mentor and my teacher, by virtue of the meaty research articles she assigned me. I was educated and forever changed by this work. I wrote a three-part series on Women and Business that included two articles on dead-end jobs for women in retail, supermarkets, the banks, Bell Canada, and Air Canada (low-paid and dead-end were then the only jobs available in those sectors); and a piece on clerical workers called “Why Secretaries Get Mad,” that elicited a barrage of mail. I also researched a series on family law reform focusing on what needed to change so that divorced women might be entitled to equal property rights and adequate child support. In 1972, Doris sent me to Ottawa to interview cabinet ministers and their opposition critics on the attitudes of Canada’s MPs towards abortion rights, equal pay for equal work, and other issues pertaining to equality. The published piece infuriated the Robert Stanfield Conservatives (the day the article appeared they held a caucus meeting to discuss their exposure as reactionaries). Doris’s unfailing expectation that the articles that appeared in her magazine would be well-researched and strong, but always fair, struck a responsive chord in me, and helped shape my approach to the discipline of writing. She adopted and nurtured me, and in doing so she launched my career.

By the time we met in 1971, I was a divorced, single parent with financial worries. Doris knew this, and she “kept [me] busy,” as she wrote in her memoir, *Rebel Daughter*. Once I needed \$1,000 in order to send one

enjoyed lunchtime drinking (as she acknowledged in her memoir) and whenever she invited me to a restaurant (usually at the now-defunct Provençal) to discuss a new piece, I worried in advance. I was a notorious failure as a drinker, having been incapable of learning how to match the drinking habits of my mostly male journalist friends (I’d made an effort once or twice, but spent the rest of the afternoon comatose at my desk). I had tried refusing, while she ordered a pre-lunch cocktail, and felt her disapproving look. Was I trying to make her look bad by drinking alone was the unspoken message. Eventually, I took to ordering a Virgin Mary—spicy tomato juice in a cocktail glass. That seemed to satisfy her.

We became good friends. In the 1970s, Doris also divorced and became a single parent, as her mother had been before her. We helped one another, she by frequently inviting me and my children to swim in the pool at her Rosedale home. She was open, always fun to be with—and increasingly famous as the years passed.

But she was also lonely. And breathtakingly honest about her feelings. One summer evening, as we sat in the darkening garden of my home, she said, memorably, “I’m an institution. I have no one to call when I can’t sleep at three o’clock in the morning.”

Just as I cannot overstate her importance in my own life, I cannot overstate the role she played in the lives of younger women who may still be unaware of what she accomplished on their behalf. Doris relentlessly pried open the tightly closed gates of the male fraternity, making it possible for the next generation of women to step inside. Although the revolution she initiated remains unfinished, she helped to change societal attitudes. In the wake of her activism, millions of women and their daughters have been able to establish real careers with appropriate monetary compensation.

I will never forget that she took a chance on the unsure young woman who called her out of the blue so long ago.

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*awards for writing and radio documentary, and the author of six books of literary non-fiction. Her next work, The Sun Climbs Slow: Justice in the Age of the American Empire, will be published in February 2008.*

### SECRETARIES: THE GREAT LEGAL PUT-DOWN

*Chatelaine*, Editorial, November 1974

“In the variety of situations that represent themselves, probably the funniest and at the same time the most tragic situation is that of the young man right out of law school with his first secretary. He has never had assistance of this type before. He is a little bit unsure of himself ... he is still, believe it or not, socially insecure with women and often does not know quite how to handle the master and servant relationship which presents itself.”

Quaint, isn't it? It goes on: “The object of the exercise is to assist him, not that he assist you. The major cost in operating a law firm is not the secretarial overhead. Unhappy as it may seem, the time of the secretary can be wasted in abundance. In the average law firm the lawyer can charge to his client in one hour more than the secretary cost that lawyer for one whole day of her efforts....”

In another part of this remarkable document we are told a good legal secretary is more skilled in law, in spite of her low pay, than most intelligent young lawyers. But there's more:

“The secretary is admonished not to attempt to ‘vamp or somehow employ her womanly wiles upon the young lawyer.’”

Indeed, the lawyer is warned, later on, that if he looks on his secretary as a woman, he is giving her an excuse to get away with a second-rate job and he would be better off choosing a “homely matronly type” so that he avoids the risk of wanting to have an affair with her.

Under no condition is he to allow her to call him by his first name, nor get involved in any way with her as a person, so that he doesn't waste his time listening to her problems. Under no circumstances is she to collect money for a shower gift or going-away gift for another secretary—that's wasting office time and should be a “subject of disciplinary action.” The secretary is also warned that lawyers can add up the number of sick days secretaries take off and “correlate the girls' absence with the days of the month.” In other words, the secretary's menstrual periods are being monitored.

As for dress, a secretary is supposed to dress “inconspicuously.”

Although she is to be attractive—but conceal it—she is expected to do everything quickly and accurately. She is to do all mail, typing, dictation, travel arrangements, make appointments, etc., which would be considered normal duties. But she is supposed to serve morning coffee—like a good hostess.

But she is quickly reminded that she should do everything possible to maximize her boss's time. And she's told, “Not only is secretarial assistance in the proper sense a delightful thing to experience from the receiving end, inasmuch as it makes you feel pampered and spoiled, but from a purely business point of view it is exceedingly profitable and therefore good business.” So the secretary is expected to do every “function capable of being delegated.”

It's also the secretary's responsibility to keep the lawyer's desk and drawers tidy, even to knowing where the Kleenex box is. She is also expected to be clairvoyant—to know what kind of office supplies are required and see that everything works—from the ball-point pen to keeping clients sorted out in order of importance.

Does all this sound as though it's an anachronistic document written in Dickensian times? Well it's not. It's a guide for the general behaviour of secretaries in a book called *Real Estate for Legal Secretaries*, in present use in the Osgoode Law Society and other legal offices. It was written—not in 1871—but in 1971. In other words the ideal legal secretary is to look like Jacqueline Bisset—but conceal it, be letter perfect in her work, totally without emotions or human failings or physical weaknesses, perform like an Aladdin's lamp slave—and be happily content to be quite openly underpaid.

*Doris Anderson, Editor*