

From Clothing Insults to Space Launches:

ABC reporter confronted sexism in the media and shares the details in her new memoir.

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Here's a trivia question for you: What do Sylvia Plath, Joan Didion and Lynn Sherr of ABC's 20/20 news program all have in common?

Turns out all three won the *Mademoiselle* magazine annual journalism contest. The similarity, however, ends there. Plath committed suicide after penning her classic novel, *The Bell Jar*. Didion, also a writer, has produced several bestsellers, including *A Book of Common Prayer* and *The White Album*.

Broadcast journalist Lynn Sherr took an arguably more difficult route to fame when she joined a major television network in 1977. As glamorous as that sounds, the TV news business back then was anything but friendly to the aspiring female gender. Outside of secretaries, those few women who did manage to endure all the chauvinistic B.S. did it by dint of sheer will (and quite an impressive paycheck).

In December, Sherr visited San Francisco to talk about her tumultuous but sensational career choice. Her memoir, *Outside the Box*, was recently published by Rodale Press, the same company respon-



Veteran television journalist Lynn Sherr talks about the broadcasting trade with UC Berkeley Professor Cynthia Gorney on December 12th. The event was sponsored by the Jewish Community Center in Laurel Heights (jccsf.org).

sible for Al Gore's book on global warming. The Jewish Community Center, located at California and Presidio, hosted Sherr's appearance. Cynthia Gorney, a professor at U.C. Berkeley's Graduate School of Journalism, was invited to chat with her onstage, Oprah-style.

At 64, Sherr is the mother of three and nearly six feet tall, which may explain her lifelong fascination with giraffes. The Wellesley graduate and Emmy award-winning journalist is also the author of two biographies about the famous suffragette Susan B. Anthony, the only woman to ever get her face on an American coin.

Sherr explained that securing equal rights for women, both within the media and without, occupied a top spot on her to-do list in the late seventies and eighties while working in network news. In her three decades with ABC, she has frequently anchored their Space Shuttle coverage and was the only TV personality to interview astronaut Sally Ride.

In a recent interview for the *S.F. Chronicle*, Sherr described her NASA assignment: "There you are standing a couple of miles away from the launch pad," she said, "but it feels like the future pushing against you! Off goes the rocket ship and then you get this whoosh coming right at you."

In the same article, Sherr spoke openly about those early, difficult days of breaking

into what was still a nontraditional occupation for women.

"When I first got to New York out of college in 1963 and went job hunting, I was told point blank by every newspaper editor in New York City, 'We don't hire girls.' The extraordinary thing is that it never occurred to any of us that we should complain.

There was nowhere to complain to. There was no EEOC (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission), no affirmative action, no laws, no rules; there was no public consciousness that said, 'This is wrong.' I also faced plenty of situations where it was clear if there were going to be women involved, it would be a woman, a token woman. So you had to wait for that woman to leave so you could get that job."

Roone Arledge, who headed ABC News at the time, even ventured to inform Sherr through another woman who was a senior producer that he didn't like the blouses Sherr wore on camera. The rookie reporter was mortified. "It's like George Bush asking Karen Hughes to tell Condi Rice her lipstick is too bright," Sherr recalls in her book. "Luckily, I got my friend Ralph Lauren to come over and tell me what was wrong and right with what I was wearing. Of course everything that was his [Lauren's], he [Arledge] thought was perfect."

continued



Sherr autographs a copy of **Out of the Box**, her new memoir.

In 1980, after winning an Emmy for her coverage of the presidential election, Sherr had the chance to sound off on the unfriendly working environment for women broadcasters when asked to speak at the industry's annual trade convention in Florida.

She opened her speech by crediting management with hiring more female journalists. Then she launched into a scathing attack on the industry's double standards, asking why so much attention was paid to recruiting slim, young and attractive women for broadcast assignments when so many of their male counterparts were balding, overweight and middle-aged.

"I was trembling as I left the podium," Sherr writes in *Outside the Box*. "Maybe three people came up to me afterward to shake my hand and say they agreed that change was needed. But almost every man

there ignored me."

The speech proved a turning point in the battle for affirmative action within the trade. After Sherr "nailed us to the cross" as one broadcaster put it, men came to appreciate the level of discomfort they were causing. Industry management started cracking down on illegal practices, and six years later, the Radio-Television News Directors Association invited Sherr to speak again at one of their shindigs.

Sherr agreed.

"I talked about the progress we had made," she explains in *Outside the Box*, "and then I talked about the political stories I was covering. I talked about reporting. There were more women in the audience this time, and everyone--women and men--gave me plenty of applause. Sometimes it really pays to speak your mind."

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