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Fiona Bruce: 'If you look like the back end of a bus, you won't get the job.'

The high-powered newsreader talks about sexual equality, how much she earns and whether her arched eyebrow is put on

Decca AitkenheadThe Guardian, Monday 24 August 2009



Fiona Bruce. Photograph: Sarah Lee

During filming of the new *Antiques Roadshow* series, a man presented a glass bottle he had recently bought from an antiques shop. He had paid a considerable sum – more than £1,000 – and felt confident that it was worth more. He was smartly dressed and well-spoken, and appeared to know what he was talking about. The show's glass expert examined the bottle, consulted a colleague, and delivered his verdict. "I'm afraid it's an empty olive oil bottle, Tesco, circa 2008. It's worth nothing at all."

Fiona Bruce actually winces as she recalls the moment. "Now I suppose we *could* have broadcast it – but it was just too cruel. The guy was devastated." But surely, I exclaim, that would have been the money shot. "It is the money shot," she agrees. "But he was devastated, this man. And it would – well, it would have been too cruel."

Wasn't Bruce even slightly disappointed to let it go? "Umm, well there's a tiny bit of my brain that realises it would have made great television," she concedes. "But it's just not what the show's about. Poor chap, *poor* chap. The thing is, if you come on the *Roadshow* we are not going to humiliate you. The thing about the *Antiques Roadshow* is not to humiliate people."

By the time Bruce has grandchildren I doubt they will be able to believe there was once a time when an entertainment show would opt not to broadcast a member of the public's humiliation because it was "too cruel". Even by today's standards, it's already an unusually wholesome, even quaint, editorial decision, but one that Bruce likes – "Oh, enormously" – which says as much about her as it does about the show.

On screen she has the smooth gravitas of a vintage **BBC** newsreader, and off air she is so exactly as you would imagine her to be that it's almost unnerving – like a one-woman masterclass in the corporation's classic qualities. At over 6ft in wedge heels, she powers along through the corridors of Television Centre, keeping up a brisk stream of lively small talk composed of perfectly formed sentences that never tail away or falter in the way most normal people's do. There is lots of self-deprecating humour – "Have I ever presented a programme I don't watch? Well, I've done loads of programmes that no one else watched!" – and not a word of profanity or slang, unless you count "God", although

26/08/2009

Fiona Bruce: 'If you look like the ...

intimidating head girl.

At 45, Bruce is now the most senior female newsreader in the country – if not in years, then certainly in status. Her journalistic credentials are impeccable; a degree in Modern Languages from Oxford, followed by a spell as a Panorama researcher, then as a reporter on Newsnight, before graduating to the studio. Apart from a brief and unhappy appearance on the BBC's *Just the Two of Us* (a celebrity duet singing contest in which she was partnered with Alexander O'Neal) in 2006 – "Never again!" she shudders – she has declined all reality TV invitations, and the closest she has ever come to a wardrobe malfunction was a minor ding-dong over some exposed thigh once while presenting *Crimewatch*, about which she was mortified. While not quite a Kate Adie, she is far closer to the tradition of the journalist than the modern presenter-as-celebrity. So what, I ask, is the appeal to her of a rather sweet, even sentimental programme such as *Antiques Roadshow*?

"Oh God, honestly, it is *such* good fun! It's a million miles away from social affairs, and schlepping round council estates, but you know, I have done so much grim journalism in my life and no doubt will continue to do so, so to do something like this is just so much fun. Someone brings something out, and clearly I've got no idea as to its value, but I say how did you come by it, and every now and then you hear something riveting. Like this woman came along and she had a medal for valour in the second world war, and she said it belonged to her grandfather's pigeon, Hughie. Now there you are! Already that is interesting. I defy you not to be interested in that. Fabulous, isn't it?"

When Bruce was chosen to replace the show's previous presenter, Michael Aspel, at the beginning of the last series, he made some snide comments to the effect that she was "overdramatic" in her news reading style, and reminded him of a "gossiping housewife". The remarks were dismissed as sour grapes, but did hint at the question that dogs any female news presenter – namely, the role her appearance plays in her qualification for the job. Bruce is, of course, beautiful, but has insisted in the past that this is not a requirement for a female in her line of work. I can't, however, think of a single woman in her job who isn't good looking, so ask Bruce if she can name one.

"Well, what I actually think is you can't look like the back end of a bus, and you do have to scrub up quite well. But do you have to be a beauty? No. Do you have to pay more attention to your appearance than the blokes do? Yes. If you look like the back end of the bus, as a woman you won't get the job. If you look like the back end of a bus as a bloke, you might get the job." She shrugs. "Twas ever thus, and I can't see it changing in my lifetime."

She would not always, I suspect, have been quite so sanguine about such gender inequalities. At university she had been a passionately committed feminist, running women's groups and even, once, camping at Greenham Common.

"I thought it would be a good thing to do for the sisters – show willing and all that – be part of the sisterhood. But as soon as I got there I realised my attachment to the sisterhood was more, um, *tenuous* than I'd thought. I found myself in more like a marquee than a tent with mud everywhere and a bit of straw and a bin liner to put my sleeping bag on. And I remember thinking," – she grins – "I didn't really sign up for this. I arrived there rather starry-eyed and naive and young, and didn't find it a hugely happy experience, because the women who were there permanently, not surprisingly, totally reasonably, thought, 'Who are these flibbertigibbets?' These sort of Greenham tourists, if you like."

She is laughing, but I wonder if the experience left her feeling disappointed?

"It did, yes. But reflecting on it, I also realised my expectations were quite naive. I'd expected to find a great feeling of sisterhood, and actually didn't. And you know, we're all individuals, the idea that there would be this warm bath of sisterliness was a totally unrealistic expectation. But you know, I was 19. What can I say?"

She tells the anecdote with a certain rehearsed polish – ruefully amused at her less

26/08/2009

Fiona Bruce: 'If you look like the ...

always been a no-brainer. Maybe I'm just simplistic about it, but if you believe in equality of opportunity, and want to champion equality of opportunity, that makes you a feminist." It's more complicated than that though, I suggest. Wouldn't her Greenham-supporting feminism have disapproved, for example, of Bruce's on-screen banter with Jeremy Clarkson about the niceness of her bottom during an episode of Top Gear?

"Oh God, yeah! There are certainly things I would have done differently then to how I do them now. And that's why I talk about feminism being a spectrum. People are more than two-dimensional, and again I think the complexities in life, and in one's makeup, grow as you get older, partly through experience. You know, when I was younger I absolutely believed that nurture ruled over nature, and were I to have my own children I knew, as I knew my own name, that any daughter would grow up exactly the same as any son. Why wouldn't she? Now I have two children, and I see it's not like that, it's really not like that, and that shocked me, and surprised me. But I celebrate the things I do with my daughter and not with my son – our first shopping trip to Claire's Accessories for hair bands. I remember just thinking, 'God, I am loving every second of this.' It was such a girly, mini-rite of passage. And those are things I would never have thought that I would do or enjoy.

"But equally," she adds quickly, "is my daughter outspoken, opinionated, feisty, very sure of her importance in the world? Yes, she is. And you know, I salute that." She pauses to laugh. "Within reason, of course, or she might turn out to be ghastly."

Bruce herself went to a south London comprehensive, and her husband of 15 years, an advertising executive, was a grammar school boy. Her father came from very humble means, leaving school at 16 and working his way up from the post room of Unilever to become a managing director, and she sounds as if she was relatively radical in her own youth. So I ask if she is at all troubled by her decision to educate her own two children – Sam, 11, and Mia, seven – privately.

"Well, no, it doesn't trouble me," she says easily. "If the schools around me were as good as the schools I have to pay for then I wouldn't do it. If there was a good one near me then they'd go. God, why not? But yeah, it's all a question of degree and perspective, isn't it?"

As she says this I can't help thinking how enviably comfortable it must be to be Bruce. She's far too clever and quick-witted to be bland – but there's a smoothness, a lack of any trace of internal conflict, that makes her seem almost unnaturally confident. Her argument about private schooling – "I don't think my children should have my feelings foisted upon them, and have to live with the consequences. That's why I don't send them to state school" – is offered as if it hasn't even occurred to her that she, like all parents, foists her ethics on to her children every single day, hoping they will grow up to live by them. There is never any chink in her composure – any hint of tension – and while I can't imagine what it must feel like to be so at ease with one's world, I don't think she is faking it.

Even her trademark arched eyebrow is not, it turns out, something she consciously has to put on – or not according to Bruce, anyway. You know that thing you always do, I begin to say, with your eyebrow – "I don't!" she interrupts. "They're just like that. One picks up more than the other. I can't do it on demand." But I've been keeping an eye on her eyebrows, and I haven't seen her do it once – so it must, I laugh, be something she controls. "No, I can't wiggle them to order," she insists. "They're just asymmetric – one goes up more than the other," and she pulls back her fringe to show me. "I can't do that thing of raising one and not the other – so no, I've never been able to do that Roger Moore thing. They just are what they are." How come her eyebrow hasn't arched once during lunch then? "Has it not?" And then, bang on cue, up it goes. "It just arched!" I tell her. She bursts out laughing. "Oh God, now I'm getting really self-conscious – oh, I don't know! Maybe there's something about being in the studio that brings it out in me. I don't know."

And that's about the closest I'm sure I'll ever get to seeing Bruce flustered. On the

26/08/2009

Fiona Bruce: 'If you look like the ...

you if that's true. Why would I?" If, on the other hand, the BBC decided to make all salaries public, "I'd have no problem with that at all. I'd be fine with that." When I ask if she thinks she is overpaid, she's quite unruffled: "I could earn more elsewhere, I know, and I've not gone down that route. So money and the best salary is not what drives me. I've chosen not to go to Sky or ITV because the programmes I've made at the BBC, I want to carry on making."

Even an unexpected intervention during the birth of her daughter did not apparently throw her. "I remember," she recalls cheerfully, "the labour went on for ages, and they asked if they could bring some students in. I said sure, I don't care. So students come in, my legs are in stirrups, right at the point of the pushing – so a bit of huffing and puffing goes on, then there's a little silence when you catch your breath before the next contraction and more huffing and puffing. And just in that little well of silence this voice plopped into it, from somewhere around my feet, saying, "This probably isn't the right time to mention it, but you are my favourite television presenter."

Bruce leans back and roars with laughter. "Literally, Mia's head was about to crown. It was fantastic. I said, "That's very nice to hear, thank you very much".

Antiques Roadshow returns to BBC1 in September

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