RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

That's My Boy!

Jenni Murray

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About the Book

For so long girls have been in the spotlight with concerted efforts made to improve their self-esteem, their academic expectations and their financial worth in the workplace. But what's rapidly becoming clear is that it's boys who are now being left behind.

That's My Boy! covers every aspect of boys' lives from birth to 18 and is fully illustrated with wonderful stories from Jenni Murray's personal experience and that of other parents. It discusses everything from how to deal with the shock of caring for a member of the opposite sex, to how to endure hours spent on a rugby touchline and how to read the signs that indicate a longing for physical affection. The vital message is that boys, like girls, should have choices and not be forced into the stereotypical role of a male.

Drawing on the latest research on the development and education of boys, this is a practical but light-hearted and celebratory guide to raising a happy and confident son, ready for a successful and fulfilling life today.

About the Author

Jenni Murray has been the regular presenter of Radio 4's *Woman's Hour* since 1987. In the Queen's Birthday Honours 1999 she was awarded an OBE for radio broadcasting. Jenni is the author of *The Woman's Hour,* a history of women since World War II and also the acclaimed *Is it me, or is it hot in here?* She contributes to numerous newspapers and magazines and is an occasional documentary filmmaker. She lives with her partner and two sons in London and Cheshire.

Also by Jenni Murray

and available from Vermilion:

Is it me, or is it hot in here?

That’s My Boy!

A modern parent’s guide to raising a happy and confident son

Jenni Murray

Vermilion
LONDON

DEDICATION

For David, a good father
who did far more than his fair share.

INTRODUCTION

I CHOSE THE title of this book with some trepidation, fearing it would infuriate number two son, Charlie, now fifteen. It's a reminder of one of the more embarrassing moments he suffered as a result of having an over-enthusiastic mother with a big mouth and a voice to match. He was twelve or thirteen at the time and (this is not pride talking, it's a fact) a leading light in his school rugby team.

Now, I've never liked rugby and can't for one second comprehend why it's currently the fastest growing and most popular sport among girls after football, but, there you go, times, they are a changing. To me it's dirty, wet, cold, violent and potentially lethally dangerous, but I have dutifully stood on the touchline week after week, wearing my thermals, learning that you get five for a try and two for a conversion, trying to distinguish a ruck from a scrum from a maul or working out why they've been given a line out (one friend from the *Woman's Hour* office tells me she got terribly anxious when her son came home and proudly announced he was going to be a hooker!). I've grudgingly acknowledged that it's a highly skilled game which teaches generosity and team spirit, uses up huge amounts of energy, and keeps the guys fit and off the streets.

So, on this particular day, he picked up the ball at the twenty-two (that, for the uninitiated, is about three-quarters of the way into the other side's half) and ran like a demon, ducking and weaving to dodge the tackles, triumphantly placing the ball directly between the posts behind his team's try line, perfectly positioned to give the kicker the best shot at goal.

And it just slipped out. Hard as I try not to be one of those awful pushy parents who demonise the ref and grunt ‘Go on my son’, I couldn’t resist yelling those three fatal words: ‘That’s My Boy!’. Ecstatic maternal pride oozed from every syllable, which, of course, resounded the length and breadth of the pitch, and was heard by every single player, including my own.

If looks could kill he would have been an instant orphan and no amount of apology or explanation after the match was accepted in mitigation. ‘Do not, Mother, (it’s Mum when he’s not cross) ever humiliate me like that again!’ was absolutely all he had to say on the matter and there it rested until now.

I decided to go with the title for two reasons. I had discussed it with Charlie who agreed it was OK to use as long he got a cut from the royalties. He must have absorbed with his mother’s milk the family motto, which most journalists adopt, stolen from the American author and screenwriter, Nora Ephron: ‘Life is copy’. It was, of course, vital to have his agreement and that of his brother, Ed, who’s now twenty and at university, before I could even embark on this work, as it’s their lives as well as my own that form its backbone. Suffice to say, it’s costing me!

The second reason for the choice of title was its celebratory tone. This book was born out of anger at the demonisation of boys that’s become common currency in the past decade or so. Only a few months ago, in February of 2003, the distinguished novelist Eva Figes, writing an article about the joys of being a grandmother, said with terrifying insouciance,

‘I have always found that every one of my granddaughters is incredibly good when in my care. No tears, no tantrums . . . when I do lay down certain guidelines, about washing hands before lunch or whatever, they are always obeyed without question. The relationship is wonderfully conflict free. It might be a different story, of course, if one of my children had produced a boy.’

How often do we hear about the trouble with boys, failing boys, difficult boys, bad boys, naughty boys, slugs, snails and puppy dogs' tails? Not an ounce of sugar, spice and all things nice, but when I looked at my two I saw nothing but fun, affection, a willingness to learn and an infinite capacity for hard work when it was called for. There was a grunty period and the occasional scrap that had to be mediated, but on the whole it's been a pleasure and they have been the light of my life.

That's not to say there are no difficult questions that need to be addressed. There are those who – convinced by evolutionary psychology and scientific experimentation which appears to demonstrate that male and female brains work differently – argue that men are from Mars and women from Venus, or that men can't talk and women can't read maps, or that men are natural hunter gatherers and it's in a woman's nature to be kind and caring. I'm afraid I think it's all nonsense and that our ambitions, talents, sensitivities and abilities are far more likely to be the product of social pressure and the atmosphere in which we are raised than of any genetic blueprint.

Feminism gave women the social support to reject the idea that we are at the mercy of our hormones and we've been afforded the opportunity and backup to determine our futures as individual human beings, rejecting the assumption that our natural milieu is in the kitchen or nursery. We were told it was indecent for a woman to dissect a corpse – now medical schools are training equal numbers of girls and boys to be doctors. We were told competing as athletes would ruin our chances of having children – tell that to Sally Gunnel and any number of other fast and powerful women who are also mothers. We were told it was unladylike for a woman to vote, let alone become Prime Minister. Margaret Thatcher would, I think, disagree.

Our choices need no longer be determined by our gender because we've accepted that there are all kinds of different

women – from the violent to the gentle, the selfish to the caring, the ambitious to be out in the world to the content to be at home. But, what have we done to give our boys the same degree of choice? What support have they had in exploring the idea that there are as many ways of being masculine as there are of being feminine? Where's the fury at the suggestion that violence and anti-social behaviour are a man's lot because he's awash with testosterone, when the merest hint that PMT or the menopause turns the female brain to mush is brushed aside with the contempt it deserves?

A girl can wear trousers with impunity. David Beckham discovered to his cost that we are not yet ready to accept a man in a sarong or even a man who shows he's hurt. When his boss Sir Alex Ferguson kicked a football boot, which hit Beckham in the face and cut his eyebrow, it was not Sir Alex who was censured for his petulant and violent behaviour, but David for showing his wound. And the insults, which were thrown at him, were those that strike a chill in the heart of any masculine man. He was not a wuss, a wimp or a baby, but a Big Girl's Blouse, under the thumb of his wife, Victoria. Interesting that when men want to bring each other down they imbue each other with feminine qualities.

Equally, the man who chooses to stay home and look after the children (as mine did), because the woman seems better suited to be career-oriented, is still regarded with some suspicion at the school gate and finds that people at parties drift away when he jokes that he makes the bread rather than winning it. The men of his generation had to be very confident in their masculinity, and preferably look, as mine does, like a front-row mean machine that you wouldn't want to confront on a dark night, to get away with it.

Some people argue that what's been dubbed a crisis in masculinity is the fault of feminism. Commentators like Melanie Phillips suggest that the removal of the social stigma from around women who were ready to earn their

own living and bring up a child alone (because they weren't prepared to bring up two babies – the man and the child that resulted from the coupling) has absolved men from the traditional responsibilities of supporting and remaining loyal to a family – leaving them utterly lost. Professor James Tooley in his book *The Miseducation of Women* goes so far as to say we've made a terrible mistake in encouraging women to think they can compete on the same level as men, because what they really want is a man to take care of them and their children. Feminist education, he argues, gave us a generation of Bridget Joneses.

It's my view that men and boys have not been absolved of responsibility. Quite the reverse. They've been given more, requiring them to work out, as girls have always had to do, how they will juggle both work and family. Men will also have to accept that to be fully rounded human beings – rather than despised and power crazed patriarchal maniacs – they will have to acknowledge that all members of the human race create a mess and need feeding, and it's not the automatic responsibility of one sex to be housekeeper to the other. If we don't manage to instil this in our sons, we will simply create another generation where relationships are stretched to breaking point on the rack of mismatched expectation. As my mother would put it, 'Another generation of men who'll grow up to be a rod for some poor woman's back.'

Professor Tooley might be astonished at the number of non-Bridget Joneses who did get their man and their baby (the American feminist and author of *The Beauty Myth,* Naomi Wolf, among them) and who report how they discovered with shock that what they thought they'd married – an equal and a best friend – suddenly morphed into 'breadwinner who can't cook won't cook' once the babies came along. As the sociologist, Professor Jonathon Gershuny put it so elegantly, 'We've created what I call The Allerednic syndrome. It's Cinderella backwards. In the old

days the Handsome Prince married a scullery maid and turned her into a princess. Now he marries a Princess and turns her into a scullery maid.'

Our boys are hungry for information and guidance on how they can fulfil the new demands being placed upon them. The writer and broadcaster Tariq Ali, who has two daughters and a son, summed up best how keen boys are to learn how to fit into the new world in which they are going to make their family lives:

'I think there is something pushing boys. They are searching for an image of what masculinity should be. In the absence of something complex and interesting and available and close, they look to the very shallow role models that we as a society provide for them: the things they see on television and all the beat up stuff on the computer games. We need to get together and start talking about how we bring up boys who are sensitive human beings.'

Quite.

This is not an academic tome. Where new research seems thorough and free of the political baggage which seeks, vainly in my view, to turn the clock back to an era where men were men and women knew their place, I have drawn upon it. But, as another Professor of Sociology, Laurie Taylor, and his son, Matthew Taylor, note in their book *What Are Children For*?, there's no shortage of 'experts advising parents on what they should and should not do to bring up their children safely, responsibly and successfully. A large proportion of these pronouncements is pious in tone and based on dubious scientific findings'. I'm afraid you have to be just a little suspicious of any science that suggests men are genetically incapable of doing the ironing because they just can't get their brains around it. They can fly to the moon, but can't press a collar? How very convenient and what absolute tosh.

I remember reading a book some years ago, called *Mapping the Mind*, which was full of fascinating pictures in glorious techni-colour, demonstrating electrical activity in

the brain and purporting to show that we are indeed in ‘two minds’. The brain’s two hemispheres do appear to have different functions. The right side of the brain is said to be connected with emotion. The right side is the one we need to survive at a basic level because it processes hunger, fear, love and aggression. The left side does sums and learns systems, it’s the grey matter required to understand a train timetable. And, of course, there is a difference. More of the right brain lights up in a woman than in a man.

I laid a bet with a colleague. ‘Just watch,’ I said. ‘I’ll give it six months and this research will be used to support the theory that there are certain jobs for which women are not suited.’ Sure enough, in less time than I predicted, came a report on equal opportunities in the fire service in Scotland. Here’s what Neil Morrisson, then Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector there, wrote in January 1999: ‘Recent wide ranging research into the brain differences of males and females emphasises that males have advantages in solving manipulative and mathematical tasks. This would affect fire service operations such as pitching ladders, parking vehicles, sensing directions etc.’

Professor Susan Greenfield, a leading authority on the brain, warns against making assumptions based on its hard wiring. The brain, she says, is plastic and can change physically depending on its use, which accounts, presumably, for those female fire officers who were furious with Mr Morrison, as they can park a fire engine, pitch a ladder and find their way though a burning building with the best.

So, how do we deal with scientific theories that seem to shore up chauvinistic tendencies that limit all those men and women, boys and girls who just don’t want to be put in boxes marked either ‘suitable for males’ or ‘females only’? It’s tempting to adopt the fascist solution of simply burning the offending material, but that’s clearly not an option in a civilised environment. We can, though, always remind

ourselves that science is far from perfect. It is performed by people who have right-brain emotions, beliefs and prejudices working alongside left-brain logic. So there are ‘lies, damned lies and statistics’; as Nietzsche put it: ‘There are no facts, only interpretations.’

This is a book that relies primarily on the experience of parents who recognise that their boys need new strategies to survive in the twenty-first century. In raising their sons, they’ve applied common sense, and a keen awareness that the gender balance has shifted, to the care of their boys, because, like me, they aimed to equip their sons with the knowledge that it’s no longer good enough to emulate outdated models of what it means to be a man. These parents were also glad to contribute to that rare phenomenon – a celebration of sons.

CHAPTER ONE

IT’S A BOY!

FOR GENERATIONS OF women those three little words, ‘It’s a boy’, heard at the end of their confinement brought a sense of enormous relief and pride in a job well done. If a woman managed to repeat the process, her status as a fecund mother of sons was assured. An heir and a spare – strong, healthy men who would fight for and protect her. They would carry on the dynasty, uphold the family name and feed and provide for her in old age. If, on the other hand, she brought forth only girls, she might at best be set aside or at worst despatched in favour of another brood mare with whom the lord and master might make further attempts to fulfil his paternal duty.

Henry VIII provides us with the best example of this quest for healthy male offspring. Divorced, beheaded, died, divorced, beheaded, survived! The fate of six women who succeeded between them in producing only two girls and one sickly boy. And, dammit, it was a girl who finally took up the royal reins and ruled for forty years of relative peace and prosperity. Elizabeth I did a jolly good job as queen with her declared ‘heart and stomach of a man’, but refused to marry or breed, more concerned with securing her own position than looking to the future. As a consequence she ended the Tudor line and opened the door for the only male heir around. James I of England and VI of Scotland was the son of the hated Scot, Mary, and ushered in a new royal

dynasty, the Stuarts. Henry must have roared with fury in his grave. All his efforts to keep a Tudor on the throne had come to naught.

For those of us reproducing in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, in Western society at least, the gender landscape into which our children are born is infinitely more complex.

The first hints that things had begun to change profoundly came in the late ’90s when the journalist Alison Pearson wrote in the magazine *Having a Baby* in 1999: ‘The sun is setting on sons these days. Girls are hot, girls are desirable, girls are the future. Holy mother, girls are the new boys.’ She told how, in antenatal classes and maternity wards across the land, the days of parents taking pride in a son and heir were over, and claimed to detect ‘an almost panicky craving for girls’. It led to a rash of articles in which parents, psychologists and experts in genetic manipulation were trotted out to extol the virtues of girls and the difficulties of raising boys – writer upon writer fell upon the old stereotypes.

In the *Sunday Times* in July 1999 Judith O’Reilly and Lois Jones quoted Linda Davies, a public relations consultant in London who was delighted when the midwives popped her baby onto her and said ‘It’s a girl’. Davies commented, ‘You always have a daughter, but you can lose a son . . . Boys get married and leave their mothers, whilst daughters grow closer to their mothers as they grow up.’ I really don’t know what fantasy world she lives in. It seems rare now for a child of either gender to remain close to their parents as adults.

My anecdotal evidence suggests that women are often only too glad to break away from their mother’s apron strings as they grow into adulthood, and are now deeply resentful of the assumption that it’s a daughter’s job to provide comfort and care for ageing parents, whilst sons can evade the responsibility. In the case of my own elder son, verging on adulthood at twenty, he feels a great desire to

stay in touch with us now he's left home, with frequent phone calls and meetings, generally to ask for advice, share his enthusiasms or to be taken out for a decent meal. All of which seem perfectly proper reasons for a child of either sex to keep in touch with parents, but feeling duty bound to be on hand as best mate is nothing but a burdensome guilt trip.

It seems to me profoundly selfish, if not arrogant, to expect your children to become your friends. The generation gap seems too wide, and a parent's years-long role as provider and police officer is too often fraught with the conflicting messages of nurture and control ever to slide into the easy, undemanding atmosphere of friendship. We have to reconcile ourselves to the fact that it's our job to launch our children, boys and girls, into the world as rounded, confident human beings and not overwhelm them with a sense of their duty to become our best friends. They'll find those outside the family, as we did.

Linda Davies' husband, Grant Clark, a sports editor with the publisher Bloomberg, was quoted in the same article. 'I grew up with two brothers, so I know how nasty little boys can be. I haven't got a sister, so I think little girls are wonderful.' If only he'd had a little sister, then he'd have known, as all women do, that little girls are not necessarily so wonderful. It took feminism a long time to grow out of its insistence that women were, as the Canadian author Margaret Atwood put it, 'somehow gooder'. Or as the *Express* columnist Carol Sarler wrote early in 2003, 'Ten eleven-year-old boys were let loose in an old house for a Home Alone television experiment – and they trashed the place. Now, a year later, the project has been repeated with girls and the producers express astonishment that they destroyed nothing. Well, of course they didn't: girls would have been far too busy destroying each other!'

In the '60s and '70s, when the politics of sisterhood was at its height, it was a feminist heresy to claim that women

were capable of violence or wickedness. The reaction to the Moors murderers, Ian Brady and Myra Hindley was typical. Although there was ample evidence that the crimes they committed against children were a joint enterprise, it was a commonly held belief that Brady was the bad lot and Hindley was simply a woman who had come under his spell and followed his instructions out of love and devotion.

It was not until Hindley died in 2002 that the full extent of her involvement was voiced and widely accepted. The feminist journalist Yvonne Roberts told the revealing story of a meeting she'd had with Hindley a decade earlier. Chris Tchaikovsky, another feminist who ran an organisation called Women in Prison, had taken Roberts to visit Hindley. Both fully expected to find that Hindley had been unfairly demonised as the embodiment of evil, but Roberts came away with the opposite impression. At one point in their interview Roberts asked Hindley how she could have picked up a child from the street in the evening and taken her to Brady, knowing what torture would ensue.

Hindley had replied with chilling lack of regret, 'She shouldn't have been out so late.' Roberts concluded that the woman, like Brady, was a psychopathic killer, clever enough to have read the feminist literature, which suggested women's crimes were generally due to abuse by or the malign influence of a man. It was her knowledge of these arguments and ability to articulate them, Roberts believed, that had led so many of Hindley's apologists, such as Lord Longford, to seek her release.

Atwood's novel *Cat's Eye*, published in the late '80s, was the first literary acknowledgement of just how nasty little girls can be. Her characters didn't josh and push as little boys are expected to do (more on this in Chapters Two and Five; I use the word 'expected' advisedly), but her characters typified the power struggles that can exist among girls and the underhand ways in which they demonstrate their cruelty. There are four friends: Grace,

Elaine, Carol and Cordelia. Elaine is the victim, Cordelia the bully. Here Elaine describes their meeting at the bus stop on their way to school.

'Grace is waiting there and Carol and, especially, Cordelia. Once I'm outside the house there is no getting away from them. They are on the school bus, where Cordelia stands close beside me and whispers in my ear: "Stand up straight! People are looking!"

Carol is in my classroom and it's her job to report to Cordelia what I do and say all day . . . they comment on the kind of lunch I have, how I hold my sandwich, how I chew. On the way home from school I have to walk in front of them or behind. In front is worse because they talk about how I'm walking, how I look from behind. .

But Cordelia doesn't do these things or have this power over me because she's my enemy. Far from it. I know about enemies. There are enemies in the schoolyard, they yell things at each other and if they are boys they fight. With enemies you feel hatred, and anger. But Cordelia is my friend. She likes me. She wants to help me, they all do. They are my friends, my girlfriends. My best friends. I have never had any before and I'm terrified of losing them. I want to please.'

Cordelia's torture goes on for many months and culminates in Elaine's life being put at risk by her so-called friends. Cordelia doesn't like the hat Elaine's wearing, takes it from her head and throws it over a bridge onto frozen water (the novel is set in Canada). Elaine is forced to go and fetch it, gets into trouble on the ice and expects the girls will be waiting to rescue her. They haven't. They've simply walked away. Not necessarily such sugar and spice, then.

Nevertheless, the fiction that girls are good and boys are bad persists. In the same *Sunday Times* article in which Davies and Clark appeared (see here) the respected psychologist at University College London, Dorothy Einon, seemed to perpetuate the myth.

'Many of the reasons why girls used to be unacceptable in society no longer exist. In addition they are not usually going to be involved in crime or violence, they are much less likely to die from an accident or illness and the potential for heartbreak is much less these days. Economic and social attitudes have been transformed. Girls no longer have to be married off at great expense. Parents are no longer worried about their reputations being besmirched by unmarried daughters becoming pregnant.'

No acknowledgement that girls are capable of violence, and do, increasingly, as their movements become less restricted than in the past, get involved in crime, and that class and poverty are as likely to influence behaviour patterns and aspirations as is gender.

Then the Dads began to pitch in. Martin Amis, Nicholas Coleridge and Peter Kingston all wrote about how fathers were going 'Girl Crazy' and valuing their daughters where in other times they might have cheered only the arrival of a son. Girls, they claimed, ARE sugar and spice and all things nice. Cleaner, cleverer, less likely to knock over the Ming vases and faithfully Daddy's girl to the end. At the time I wrote a newspaper article, which, yet again, was my infuriated response to such gender stereotyping.

'How useful it will be, now it's no longer quite the done thing to replace the older model in middle age with a younger spouse or girlfriend, to have a daughter to trot out a la Chirac, Clinton, John Major or Martin Bell. A son, says the adage is yours till he takes a wife, a girl is yours for life.

So, what shall we do with the slugs, snails and puppy dog's tails? The juvenile action men, exam failures, university dropouts, car jackers and grunts? The guided missiles set to destroy sitting rooms and the social order? Suffocation is said to be effective. Starvation works well, preferably on a hillside or in an abandoned house, so you don't hear the pitiful cries. Poisonous oleander daubed on the tongue is quicker and apparently painless. There's abortion, or, with high-tech reproductive methods, you need never conceive a male.

None of this is journalistic fantasy from the satirical school of Jonathon Swift. It's the fate of many millions of baby girls and female foetuses. In the late '90s, the journal Theory and Time, *published in North East China, wrote of a small district of Shenyang Province, "Every year, no fewer than twenty abandoned baby girls are found in dustbins or corners." Ultrasound scanners were described as "an accomplice in throttling the life of the female foetus". UNICEF in a similar report stated, "There is perhaps no more shameful statistic than the fact that some forty to fifty million girls and women are missing from the Indian population." But, I hear you cry, not in this country, not in the civilised West! I refer you to a recent article in the Express newspaper, "Doctor who will advise on aborting girl babies", the doctor of the headline operates in Cheshire. The* News of the World *pointed to three doctors, all in London, who would offer the same "service".*

What dangerous territory we enter when we place more value on one gender than the other. The women's movement, except at its most outrageous and ridiculous, never intended the promotion of girls' interests at the expense of boys'. Equal opportunity means encouragement for all, so how can we now

claim to dote on our daughters and denigrate our sons? How can we expect these downtrodden lads to become the husbands and fathers our daughters and grandchildren deserve? It's surely time to cut the critique and be constructive, rather than leave our boys floundering in a sea of rhetoric about the renegotiation of relationships and the changing nature of the workplace, believing their dads were all bad and they are even worse. They'll lash back and who could blame them?'

I stand by every harsh word.

I must confess, though, that I personally found it difficult and confusing to even consider the idea of becoming a mother to a son. For nine months the imaginary baby I carried around was called Eve. Like so many others I was infected by the idea that boys would be noisy, rowdy, violent creatures with inherent criminal tendencies and no prospects in what was beginning to be perceived as a feminised culture. (We do so often forget how under-represented women are even today in politics and the upper echelons of industry or the professions.)

I am also the only daughter of an only daughter and blithely assumed that it would be my lot to follow an established pattern. Curiously, the fact that my father is the youngest of five sons and my partner has four older brothers never entered my antenatal imagination.

What a girl my Eve was going to be. I chose her name with what now seems an almost embarrassing degree of pointed political sensibility. She would be a kind of first woman, born brave and strong into a world where her talents would be universally recognised and nurtured. I would understand what she would need to survive as a girl and then as a woman. She'd be a mini-me, but better. Mine would be the first generation of mothers for whom the words, 'It's a girl', would not be considered a sign of breeding failure. For months I chattered to her about how we would shop for lovely clothes together, giggle over the same jokes and share a passion for Dorothy Parker and Madame Bovary. I had her called to the bar, becoming a

Queen’s Counsel and sitting on the highest bench in the land before she was out of nappies. I could not have been more mistaken. So much for getting to know your baby whilst still in the womb!

As Edward emerged, the words ‘He’s here, he’s here!’ burst from his wildly excited father. The midwife shrieked, ‘Ooooh! It’s a boy! A big strong boy!’. Their triumphalist tones suggested that I had been quite wrong to think a girl would be welcomed with the words ‘big’, ‘brave’ or ‘strong’. Other parents to whom I’ve spoken who were present at the birth of their daughters, confirm my suspicion that the arrival of a girl no longer engenders an air of commiseration, but she is welcomed with a softer, sweeter air. ‘Ah!’ say the midwives, ‘you’ve got a little girl. See how delicate and pretty she is.’

A father of two sons, Richard Denton is a freelance filmmaker and former editor of *Everyman* on BBC2. He took on the staff job when he was left alone with his small twins – a boy and a girl, Nicholas and Alexandra, now fourteen – so that he could regulate his working day around the children. He also has an older son, from an earlier marriage: Oliver is twenty-five and went to live with his mother when his parents separated. Thus, as Richard explains, he’s been an absent father, albeit one who kept in close touch with his son, and a single father. He is very conscious of how gender inequality manifests itself within seconds of birth.

His reaction to the birth of Oliver was, he says ‘Pretty standard. I just went around the hospital feeling sorry for anyone who hadn’t had a son. Literally, the other fathers would say they’d had a girl and I would say, “Oh, I’m so sorry”. Then when my second lot were born and it was a boy and a girl, everyone was delighted and reassured. My own father’s response was visceral. He was thrilled and said, “The man’s done the job”. The women had the same excitement. It was as if I’d achieved the ideal of two sons – the heir and the spare – and a little girl as an insurance