**Heather’s Story…**

**Summary:** In this interview, Heather Walker talks about her life as a writer. She talks about the difficulties and pleasures of giving advice as an Agony Aunt for nearly twenty years, office politics, a brief employment as a laboratory employee in breweries in New Zealand and in England, and finding life in her own work as an author after formal employment.

**This is Claire it is the 15th of November 2012 and I’m with Heather in her house. Heather, could you spell your surname for us?**

**Heather**: Walker. W-A-L-K-E-R.

**Okay, and when and where were you born?**

**Heather**: I was born in Scotland, in Kirkcaldy in 1933.

**OK. So, we are here today to talk about your work and what you’ve done. Um so what, what was your main job?**

**Heather**: I think the main job I done the longest was at erm Woman Magazine where I answered the letters on the problem page.

**Wow. How long was you there for?**

**Heather**: 20, nearly 20 years.

**And what did that involve?**

**Heather**: Well, the letters came in er addressed to The Agony Aunt, but in the early days there were hundreds obviously one person couldn’t answer them, so we had answer them on our own, use our initiative and answer them as we are part of a big correspondence department. And then the last few years I was sort of head of that correspondence department and but I still continued to answered the letters, and responsible for the other ones that came in like fashion, beauty, knitting or practical problems.

**And what were some of the problems you’d have to answer, can you remember any in particular?**

**Heather**: Oh, well some usually very, very sad, uh, people who’ve been bereaved, people, there might be love problems, um, practically any problem you could, you could er think of er s-s-sometimes erm there were people who you know couldn’t cope with un- unwanted pregnancy and course in the early days er before The Abortion Act when I was there, there wasn’t the same solutions and we had er problems er as perhaps as there are today.

**And what was the process of answering those, what equipment did you use, how long did it take you?**

**Heather:** Well we used to, er just use er, an ordinary manual typewriter and towards the end I did I used a Dictaphone, cause we had a typist who could do it, but mainly it was manual typewriting. Computers were just coming in as I was leaving.

**Okay. What was the environment like that you worked in?**

**Heather**: Well we – do you mean the working environment? Yeah, a very pokey office, in uh, Matlin Street where we had I don’t know mice and rats and I don’t know what, I don’t know, well perhaps we didn’t have rats, but you know very pokey. And then we moved to the main building in High Holborn which was a bit better and then we moved to Kings Reach Tower which is in Stamford Street which er is just on the border of Southwark, so that was much better modern, modern newly-- er, building.

**And was there any particular in the, in the, first building was there any particular smells in the building or from what was around the building?**

**Heather**: Er. I don’t think so, I don’t think so, I-I remember. No, not particularly.

**How many girls were working on the, er, problem page?**

**Heather**: Uh, used be about fo-three or four of us, plus a-a-a typist. I think that 3 or 4 at the most, yes.

**And what was your relationship like with them?**

**Heather:** Oh, er we got on ok. Er, one of them I was friendly with until she died, er a year or two ago one of erm s-some of the others we lost touch with no but we kept in touch. We were on the hole, we got on not too badly, we were sort of all in it together, sort of against the boss as you usually are.

**What was your boss like?**

**Heather** : Well she wasn’t er wasn’t very easy to get on actually when it was a – this was before erm yeah before they retired yeah one, she was a bit er difficult very difficult to get on with, and the other one -- there was actually it was a strange thing was divided into two bosses and one was very easy going, I mean if you If her staff didn’t turn up till lunch time she wasn’t too bothered, but the other one if you didn’t turn up dead on time-- she was strict on time keeping and I don’t know a lot, and anyway, we didn’t get on too well. Er, she did eventually leave but a, and that’s when erm, I think that’s before we moved to Kings Reach Tower, yeah.

**And when you moved into the new building was there any changes to how you did your job or what your, what your job was?**

**Heather**: I think, er not a great deal there was we were and open plan, and then as we’d always worked in a completely different building from The Agony Aunt, the main Agony Aunt then we were much closer together and eventually she moved into a little er place just in our open plan office so we were much, much more, erm you know erm, much more in contact and that, in some ways was difficult because we’d always done our own thing and made our own decisions about what we answered and then she used to sort of come along and look over our -- and sort get more involved and we didn’t always agree. So that was, that sort of human side was a bit more difficult.

**And when you was writing your answers, how did you write your answers? What process did you go through did you, did you talk to each other about the problem, or did you just did you go with your own thinking?**

**Heather**: A lot of it, yeah, a lot of it was our own thinking, sometimes we er talked it over, but generally yeah generally you, you were on your own you had to er you had to think about it and you couldn’t take too long over it because of course you had to try and get through a certain amount every day.

**And how did you feel answering, reading and then answering, people’s problems?**

**Heather:** Well once, when you’d- I first started I used to home and worry about it, but after time you, you learn to detach yourself, and not, you know because you don’t, you never actually see the person, you never know if you’re getting the full story and sometimes, erm, a very simple thing, er if you got a letter back, the person was hiding what the real problem was. So, erm, yeah you did, you did learn to detach yourself. Sometimes we used to have a- a bit of a laugh, but it wasn’t being callous, it’s a way of sort of dealing with it some very depressed people or very unhappy problems.

**And what did you spend your wages on?**

**Heather:** Well I’d,uh, I had to pay the rent I suppose, and just the- the usual things. Holidays, er yeah, just you know keeping yourself financially afloat I suppose, yeah.

**What did you enjoy about your job?**

**Heather**: Yeah I did enjoy it. Erm, it was a bit unusual and you learnt things, and I was never very happy towards the end because a lot of, you know, the office politics that you’ve got to get involved in. And then they were looking for er people to leave, like without the redundancy money. There was a lot of the last year or so, I didn’t enjoy it , and well I never sort of enjoyed the politics of it. But er, yeah it was enjoyable sort of creative job up to a point and up until the end when you had a lot of freedom to do what you wanted, your ideas and things like that.

**What did you do after you, after you left?**

**Heather**: Uh, now what’d I do? Well yeah, I took the redundancy money. That’s when I developed, I discovered that I-I had this illness, sarcoidosis. And I couldn’t really go back to a-a full time job again. And it was in the 80s a bit difficult to get a job. And that’s when I went back to writing which I’ve always done and I went on with this biography that I started ages ago while I was working and worked on that. And then I got more of, erm during the-being the- sarcoidosis I, er got more and more of my work in and doing that which I continued to do, and I still continue to do the writing.

**So when you was writing on your own, what was a typical day like for you?**

**Heather**: Well I used to, um well I’d have to go through what I’ve written the day before and I’d do some, erm, research and try to get a, try to get a chapter finished. And then I –I did go to Oxford when I could and, erm, did research cause all of the manuscripts were at-in Oxford so that was sort of every- what you could do you could leave your erm what your working on you could sort of leave it there and, with a certain amount of time I think perhaps two weeks, then you could go back and pick it up again. So that was the easiest way for me to do it, instead of having to go through and ordering your things again.

**And what was a typical day like at Women’s Own? If you can describe a typical day what would you have done?**

**Heather:** Well you’d come in, and pick up your letters or, and just you’d had to work, work through them, you know, and er work through your. Or sometimes we’d had to sort the post sort it into erm urgent if urgent, non-urgent and some things were to do with knitting or cooking or something which we could go send it off to a particular department. And you just got on, er typing away your, your replies.

**What time did you start work?**

**Heather:** I think it was, I think about 9 o ‘clock, I think. Nine, yeah. Yeah it must have been either nine --I usually leave here about half past eight or so to get to Stamford Street, perhaps it was quarter past nine. About nine o’clock, anyway.

**And in that typical day were you allowed to take breaks? Did you decide when you took your breaks or did the office take breaks at the same time?**

**Heather:** No, erm we didn’t. No, I used to take a late lunch and one of my colleagues, cause she used to leave, she worked at (Elpton) and her husband worked, what used to be the GLC and they used to leave togetherquite early in the morning. And then, so she was ready for lunch about twelve o’clock, and I used to go about a I suppose I went about one o’clock when she came back. We sort of did it that way.

**So when you first started writing for Women’s Own you used a typewriter, did you move onto using a computer later on in your writing career?**

**Heather:**  I didn’t use the computer till about 2003 when, erm they provided me with one from sarcoidosis, the-you know, the organisation. I-I was sort of reluctant, but I now see, you know what a great help it is and how much work you can do, erm with a computer. I mean I can send off emails that I’ve done today, or this week somebody, erm they want to make a collection of his mother’s funeral so I can do that right away rather than a telephone call or a erm sometimes its some people are in other countries or in Europe or it, so yeah I realise it’s so much better. But it did take me a bit of time to sort of come around to it, so, you know.

**And has it had an effect on the speed and process in which you can write?**

**Heather:** You mean my own writing?

**Yeah.**

**Heather:**  Yes, I think so when I’m erm I think quite a lot of people, like if I’m doing something like a piece of poetry I do like to sit down and do it by hand, write and then on the thing. Oh yes for copying out yes it it is much better, yeah. It’s a slightly different way of working, but once you get used to it I wouldn’t sort of go back to the, the old way or a manual typewriter. Er, it’s, you know, I’ve gone quite the other way from being hostile and I realise now, you know what, how useful it is, of course except when it crashes, it has done (laughs). Er, then you think “oh well,” but you know you’ve got take , well I suppose I’m pretty slow in learning but a yeah I think it is-a much better. And I had that, what is it, repetitive strain injury using the manual typewriter but that’s practically-that’s practically gone now , because it’s so much, so much easier on your wrists, yeah.

**So when you were using a typewriter, you had repetitive strain and now that’s gone because you’re using the computer?**

**Heather**: Yeah, yeah, yes.

**What was it about the typewriter the caused that repetitive strain?**

**Heather**: I suppose cause it’s, it’s manual and it’s the amount of force you’ve got to do. I did try an electronic one and didn’t get on too well, I think its just the force that you use. I did, I had had an operation on my wrist actually many years ago so, er, to, when I had-a a form of septic arthritis and they had to take some bones out. So I mean I don’t bother, I mean, I’m so used to that now, but it may have been a contributing factor.

**And was that because you were using the typewriter all day on its own to type?**

**Heather:**  Yes, yes, yeah.

**Oh ok, how long would it… so if you wrote a reply, how many replies did you have to do in a day?**

**Heather:** I think we did have time and motion we said it had to be about 16 or something but then I was, then I said because of, we did have a a- a typist who, anyway, it was sort of complicated. But there somebody who was actually in charge but he was a-away for about, he doesn’t, was ill and just didn’t come back, so I had to do his job. But her, the typist was going spare so to speak so I used to, I sometimes I dictated and sometimes I just typed out in rough and she retyped it because otherwise she wouldn’t have had anything to do. Erm, s- yeah that was, that was how we got through the day.

**And was there any problems that you particularly remember?**

**Heather**: Oh, well, er I remember the woman who said, she had, did she have twelve? Well, some of them had a bit of a laugh, but it is a sad problem, did she have ten or eleven children? ‘I’m expecting twins in October but I don’t go out to work.’ I thought (laughs), you know, you don’t need to feel guilty about not going out to work you got all these children and you’re expecting twins. Er, but I think she yeah she had reached the end of her tether. Or the woman who said her- her father won’t give her a white wedding cause she’s marrying, her husband’s black, I know it sounds funny but it is it had a tragic story underneath it , you know you can laugh but underneath it was because, erm, she left, she’d left home and then the-the husband to be, her boyfriend, er he-he sort of took very badly with that and a I think she was unhappy because she didn’t have her-her family and she didn’t really have a relationship with him and she was sort of isolated. Anyway, that was, erm, quite sa-, erm. Course I had-I did realise I got a letter from somebody who was sharing a flat with me and she didn’t know what, what work I did. Cause she imagined as I was, you she was erm, that I’d be a secretary and I got a letter from her (laughs). And she was, erm, well she a decent enough- well she was German, and erm she used to pay me every, she wouldn’t pay the rent weekly, she would pay me I think every day or something, she was... And then she, and I could guess that this man who came to see her, that there was, it did turn out that he was married, but I did guess there was something wrong so I said, I think that it would be a good idea if you went back to Germany and back to your mother. Which she did (laughs). But she didn’t know the advice was coming from me! Er-er yeah and like there was a, where I lived, I used to see, there used to a, I think it was a wheelchair outside this, this house or flats and I know the woman did write and was having a problem with her boyfriend. So, there were things like that happened. Erm, but yeah you, did have quite a lot of sad ones.

**So did anyone know that wrote for Women’s Own, or was you not allowed to say that you was the problem..?**

**Heather**: There was a woman-- Oh yes, I told people. They used to say, “Oh, I thought all those problems were made up.” I said, “You don’t need to make them up! You don’t need to make them up, there’s plenty of them.” But-a, yeah we did get hoaxes, but quite often you could, you could spot a hoax. Because nobody sits down if they’ve got a problem and puts: A, my problem is: A,B,C. It’s all usually sort of, it’s-it’s muddled up. They don’t start, you know, you don’t usually start it in a few sentences and you can, if you’ve got a problem you can boil it down to paragraph or two.

**So once you have written your reply, or the typist has typed it up, who did you send it to then?**

**Heather:** What, do you mean for checking ?

**(Responds yes.)**

**Heather**: We used, -yeah they did have someone who’s job was to check them, who- they were what they call a signer, or sometimes I had to do it myself or you know, or yeah there was somebody who’s job it was to sign it. Not a very happy job because not everybody would-a take kindly if they had to alter something or put it right. And then, in the very end, the last few months, The Agony Aunt did ‘em herself, and that’s where problems arose, you know, ‘cause she was actually-a, you know, ‘cause we weren’t used to having to, erm, somes-like, yeah. Sometimes it was okay. Then I noticed after I left she’d-she’d published quite a lot of my replies in the magazine. So she couldn’t ’ve think they were all that bad. Oh yes, she did say I was a very good letter writer, I got a-a letter after that. But we hadn’t always agreed. Well, I suppose you don’t, if you’re presented with something, two people you don’t always agree, how to deal with something.

**So, sorry, yeah, that’s what I was going to ask. Erm, so you would reply, would, so all the letters couldn’t ’ve gone into the magazine?**

**Heather:** Oh, no, no.

**But you still replied to the person that sent you the problem?**

**Heather:** Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

**Oh, okay.**

**Heather:** Yeah.

**And when they were published in the magazine, did they go under the Agony Aunt’s name or your name?**

**Heather**: Her name.

**Oooh.**

**Heather:** Yeah, yeah. Well, she, j-erm. Yeah, she did a lot of, a lot of her-her own. But sometimes, no- I don’t think she would publish if they were anonymous. She would not- she wouldn’t, erm, publish anonymous letters.

**And, did you socialise with the people that you worked with?**

**Heather:** Well my h-. Oh, yes. Well, just with one or two, oh yes, yeah. Erm, some are not, not everybody, but yes we did. Well, we’d have lunch together or we’d go out to, erm, I think only one of them, I’d go to, she’d go to, she’d come here or I’d go to her house. Yeah, that sort of thing, yes, yeah. Oh, I think we went away on a weekend together, erm, ‘cause I wanted to go, it was to do with the book I was writing. And we went to Cheltenam, ‘cause she’d been evacuated as a child in Cheltenam, and she wanted to go back. And I then I wanted to go back and do some research. So, yeah, we were friendly up to that point, but not, I say, not absolutely everybody, yeah.

**And so that, when you started to write for yourself and you were doin’ the bibliography – biography, sorry. Was there a difference from having worked with people in an environment to then working on your own?**

**Heather:** Oh, yes, yeah, yeah.

**What was that, what was that difference?**

**Heather:** Well you do miss, erm. Well I think the first time I, thing I missed was, actually you’ll find it a bit daffy, it was my birthday. Erm, you don’t have a, you don’t have an office celebration, I used to buy cakes and you sort of miss that. Yeah, yeah it was, erm, yeah, you do miss being on your own. And-a, on the other hand, your, you got a bit of freedom to do what you want, you don’t have someone looking over your shoulder. But yeah, you do miss the-the other people, and the-the sort of social part, or talking to people, yeah, it is very different.

**And where would you write? If you, when you’re writing, where do you write?**

**Heather:**  I write over h-, I used to,er, type, yeah, over there. Or sometimes sit here and-and, if I’m not, you know, going through reading, of course there’s quite a lot of reading to do, or research.

**So, when you go to work, you leave the house, you travel to work, and there’s that process of going to work. If you’re working at home, does it, does it change it from going to work, or is it more relaxed? Is it…?**

**Heather:** Yeah, I think it’s more relaxed. What not, not having to get on the bus and everything, yes. Yeah, I’d say there is, but it takes a bit of getting used to. Like if you feel you, you, erm, when I was decide to go, if you got to ask somebody’s permission to do some- to do something, I know it sounds daft, but that’s what you’ve been in-in you’re working life, you can’t have a day off without asking for it, but this time you decide take a day off it’s up to you, yeah.

**And what, what mo-, where’s the motivation and the discipline, ‘cause like you’ve said, you’ve not got someone watching you, there’s not a pay check at the end of the month, you know, how do you continue to carry on with that?**

**Heather:** I say, with difficulty, if by any, sometimes, erm, you, it doesn’t happen very often, I was doing an article, or there was an editor, or a, you have a, if you’d go into competitions you do have a deadline. But no, it-it is difficult because you think, ‘oh, well,’ unless, I didn’t have a publishing contract, unless you have a contract or something you’ve got to fulfil, yeah it is difficult, the-the-erm, but you don’t have it work. Yes, there is a difficulty, and that, as I saying, the bare times, when I had to finish an article or do something. But, no, I, it is, erm, course you’ve got to discipline yours-yourself, yeah.

**And you were saying about having a publisher. Can you describe that process of having a publisher and-and having a deadline, what sort of, how does that come about?**

**Heather:** Erm, well once it were accepted for publication, you have to, erm, you get proofs to read them, and things like that. And then you have to agree, agree to their terms of having it published, so you-you got a certain time. Erm, yeah they-they keep, they send you like several different types of proofs and you’ve got to go through them and send them back. So, there’s a certain amount of discipline there ‘cause you know somebody’s, someone’s waiting for them.

**Was there any part of, when you were working** **at Women’s Own, was there any part that you didn’t enjoy?**

**Heather:** No, I think as I said, erm, the sort of politics and things. And –a, well, erm, you know, because it was a union and you had to, er, it was a closed shop, and-a, I think I opted, you had to, supposed to pay a-a few towards the Labour Party I think, but you could, you could opt out. But I was the only one who-who decided to opt out. And they used, erm, the man used to come in in a big ceremony, he said “Oh, you, here’s your money to be repaid.” But he sort of did it much as to say I, you know, made me feel uncomfortable, but anyway I didn’t let him see that I was uncomfortable. Erm, there was a lot of, I didn’t particularly like that, but you had to be a member of the union, and you had to go to the meetings. And-a, yeah, well, I suppose you get used to it, like anything else, but-er, that didn’t, I didn’t particularly like that but there wasn’t much you could do about it. I’d ‘ve liked to been in the National Union of Journalists, but in those days you couldn’t, you couldn’t cross-cross from one union into another. But, erm, that’s very much gone now, which does make it easier for people.

**And where had you worked before Women’s Own?**

**Heather:** Now what, oh, I just did, erm, well I did, I worked five years in a laboratory in, er, a brewery. ‘Course that’s what I’d done when I was out in New Zealand. Erm, I did that, but then towards the end, I, erm, I spent, we used to go up to John Cass in the evening and go to lectures there. And then there was, erm, suggestion that you could, well in those days you could study for a-a degree after work, but that didn’t really appeal to me. And-er, I le-,erm, I left, well I did to sort of get my office skills up and I did a lot of temp work. And then that’s where I got the job on Woman. ‘Cause I was really much more interested in writing than, than, er, taking a science degree. So, whether that would have been a good idea I don’t know. Certainly I didn’t want doin’ it after work.

**So can you explain the laboratory? What did you do in there?**

**Heather:** Well, I-I started off, now wait a minute, yeah, yeah, wait, no, I started off, I can’t quite remember what I did do there, we-I used to do a lot of samp-you did sampling, was it quality control? You did a bit of, erm, yeah, you just, erm, took samples, and-and you did a lot of check on it. How much, you know, you checked on the, what was going on in the-in the bottling. Used to go down, after it’d go down there. I was- well, I started off in Victoria, erm, and then that stout brewery and then we went out to, I went out to Moorgate. I think to begin with I was- apart from, there was a typist lady and myself, I think we were the only females there to begin with. Although, there were had females who worked on the bottling plant, but that was, we were sort of different from, you know, we weren’t, we didn’t work in the factory. I think that was to begin with, and then others came, er, yeah. Honestly, I, well anyway, I-I, erm, I say, yes I went to New Zealand first I worked in a brewery there. Erm, and then that experience helped me in getting a job here, yeah.

**How old was you when you went to New Zealand?**

**Heather:** Twenty-one.

**And was there a particular reason why it was New Zealand?**

**Heather:** I just, just wanted to travel, suppose, and get away from home. Life was a bit easier these days, in-in-in those days than it is these days traveling, yeah. So, I don’t know if I’d do it again, or advise anyone do it. Anyway, I had a good, you know, had a good time. Then, er, I’d only decided to go for two and I think I stayed for three. So I was about twenty-five when I came back.

**And you worked in a brewery laboratory in New Zealand?**

**Heather:** Yeah, yeah. Well I had a, yeah, I started in, yeah, I started in, yeah that’s what I did. I have a feeling I was in a-a another one where they -we did milk, we tested some milk powder and things that came off, it was down in the keys. Then I must’ve moved to- must’ve moved to the-the brewery one, yeah.

**Was there differences working in New Zealand to working in England?**

**Heather:** Oh, yeah, it was a much, erm, I think I prefer New Zealand much more. Erm, wasn’t so, cla- sort of class-ridden. You know, as a-, you didn’t, people didn’t, I don’t know, I did, but people would call the boss sir in this country, and-and men were called by their surnames. You know, like, sort of, but down in, erm, New Zealand, no, there’s much more, erm, there’s much more not so class-ridden and it wasn’t so, eh, race, well a bit, you know, racism wasn’t in that country. Because the man who was a Maori who ran, he ran quite a part of it, and he used to say to me, ‘Oh, my grandfather’d eaten Scotsmen, ‘ he used to say to me (laughs). You know, there was nothing that, I don’t think in the 1950s you would find a-a Jamaican or a man from the West Indies in charge of a big office. Yeah, like, to them it was just a natural thing, and you know if your daughter was marrying a-a Maori that was okay, you know. It wasn’t, I don’t-I don’t think there was the class conscious or the race conscious like, like there was in here. So it’s great, I mean obviously it’s gradually changed.

**Was there other differences, or was that the main one?**

**Heather:** What do you mean, between the two?

**Yeah.**

**Heather:** Erm, yeah, I think that was, that that was the, yeah that might be the main thing, yeah.

**How did you get the job at the magazine?**

**Heather:** Uh, well I just saw an advert in the Evening Standard, applied for it, there was only six of us, well I was the only one who could type (laughs). So, and I and, erm, she asked me to do a test letter, and I remember something I’d seen in Women’s Own, so I just copied the-the answer. And I just, I got the job, but, as I-I’d just come across an article, a-a little article I’d written that’s, it’s over there. I-I didn’t realize that I’d written it. Yeah, I was, and when I was leaving, or just before I was leaving they put an advert for the same, exactly the same sort of job, letter writer, and I think 5 or 600 people wrote in, compared to six when I started off, it shows you. And I don’t think one of the people, not one of the people that wrote in had any experience of letter writing- of, er, the job. So, it just shows you how, erm, you know, unemployment rises, and, you know, it was eas- fairly easy for me to get a job. But-a, well they were all very well, people who applied, they all had degrees or were well qualified, but not with experience.

**So did you have to have qualifications, did you have to be good at something, to, to get that job?**

**Heather:** Well I, well you had, for the letter writing?

**(Responds yes.)**

**Heather:** Yeah, I suppose you had to be able to, er, spell, but the thing is, it’s getting your point across in-in-in print. What it is, yeah, is communi- being able to communicate. You know, so the person you’re writing to knows exactly what you’re, you’re meaning.

**Yeah, ‘cause you just said you’d have to be able to spell and instantly I thought, well you wouldn’t have had Spell Check! (Laughs)**

**Heather:** (Laughs) No! Oh no, well I remember one of them, yeah, course I was slightly different generation because we had, we had to sp-, you know, you had to learn to spell. I know she always got mixed up with naval, erm, to do with the Navy, and navel to do with your navel. Get it? She always got the two mixed up. And, er, yeah and there was, pasteurised isn’t spelt like pasture-ised, it’s, ‘cause it’s spelt, it’s named about Louis Pasteur. It’s Pasteur-ised. I don’t, erm, I remember that that used to cause, ‘cause people always used to spell that -they didn’t like, that was corrected, yeah. But, er, yeah it is, it’s the case of writing and getting your point across.

**So when you left Women’s Own, did you straight away start writing for yourself, or was there a, was there a break for a little while?**

**Heather**: Erm, yeah, no I don’t think I-I had a break. Course I had to, erm, go up to Scotland for a time now and again ‘cause, my-my well, my mother, see my mother, and then she was ill and she died in ‘99. So, that sort of break where I couldn’t write when I was, much when I was up there. Er, but no I think I sort of started to get round fairly right away.

**And what did you enjoy most about your working life?**

**Heather**: Oh, heavens. I don’t know, it’s difficult. Well I suppose you, you do learn something, you do learn from your-from your work, you know. Erm, like people now, keep, there always coming in here for various bits of advice, and I-I’m sort of able to tell them where they can get help and advice. I mean there’s that, I was, and I suppose the people, you-you meet people. Er, or make friends with people, yeah. But-a, I suppose you-you earn a bit of money, it weren’t the money actually because it wasn’t particularly well paid, er, compared with other jobs. But, I don’t think that was the main, the main source.

**And do you remember your interview for Women’s Own? Did you have an interview?**

**Heather:** Yeah.

**Do you remember it?**

**Heather:** Yeah. I had to see this-this person and they were – course they, they, that’s what they’d boosted the job up to be something that you could just be popping in next door and you’d be meeting The Agony Aunt, you’d be and, oh, it was boosted up to be some sort of thing that, er, obviously at turned out it wasn’t. (Laughs) I don’t know what, if lots of jobs are like that, but-a, yeah. But I was-she, it was offered on the spot, I don’t know what it is like nowadays where you have to wait a week or two. After I’d done my little test, she said, ‘Would you like to come and work?’ So, erm, I did. I think I had to hand in, no I was doing temp work. Yeah, that was, yeah. So I do remember that. It was very, it was very oh ’s informal, I don’t know, well I, of course I had to fill out a form but I don’t, I don’t remember.

**And you stayed for twenty years?**

**Heather:** Yeah. (Laughs)

**And did you ever think of leaving?**

**Heather:**  Oh, yeah, I did try for other jobs. Erm, I did think, but, erm, course I, erm, one I went to, and they couldn’t believe on such a low salary I had so much responsibility for the job. I remember one saying, ‘You go to your editor and tell her it’s a disgrace for the work you’ve got to do.’ And I thought, ‘Oh, yes. That wouldn’t go down very well.’ Yeah, so I had that, erm, yeah. But of course, as you get further on, there was a one at IT- I think it was ITB ‘cause they had a similar sort of job, but she said, ‘You know with your pension rights, and your various things,’ she sort of said, ‘You’d really be better to stay where you are.’ You know, this was, for that, ‘cause they didn’t offer all that much more money. So she did say that, you know, from that point of view. So, in the end I never, er, I never moved.

**So, when you was working at Women’s Own, what- you said that at the beginning, you know, you would go home and you’d think about the-the problems that you had read and the answers that you’d gave – did you feel a sense of responsibility, did that last throughout those twenty years?**

**Heather:** Well, yes, yeah I think so, yeah. Erm, as I say, you’d kind of detach yourself. But you know, if, erm, you know, if you’re, you’d,erm, sort of, hadn’t really answered the question. Well of course, one thing you do need, you want to do it so the person won’t write back and complain, that sort of thing. Because, erm, I remember once there was a w-a student who said that, erm, one of her, erm, she thought one of her tutors was, er, had fallen in love with her or was very much attracted to her. And I sort of did a long, a long letter saying, ‘no I don’t think this is, you know, I think you’ve got it wrong,’ or something. And she wrote back and said, ‘well, you don’t understand, he comes and stands under my window or something, so, you know, you don’t know much about,’ you know. So, whether that was true or not, I thought well, you always, well, you had, erm, it’s difficult to grasp exactly, you know, what the person is saying. So sometimes, I’m, you know, erm. Another woman who‘d written from South Africa and said, ‘well you don’t- I can’t buy your magazine,’ or something, out there, and a- you are biased against white South Africans and I did a whole lot of spiel, and she wrote back and said, ‘now what I’m really complaining about is we can’t get knitting patterns.’ (Laughs) So, you know, I thought, well you sometimes, you’re on the wrong track.

**And when they wrote back, when you saw that reply, did you think, ‘Oh, no, they’ve written back!’ (Laughs)**

**Heather:** (Laughs) Yeah, well sometimes they wrote back and saying how, thank you very much, yeah. I was, there was a bit of a fear if they’d wrote, if they’d write back they’d complain, but of course they could be slightly paranoid. Yeah, one or two were slightly paranoid. So we did get letters from, what was it, doctors, who used to send a picture of themselves in evening dress or something. So this is, so they had some sort of dichotomy, that you know, that we have a private life, we’re not just, just a doctor, you know. They were the only per-people who used to send in, er, photographs. Except, I remember one man, a young man, who sent, he used to think he was terribly thin, and his doctor would say, ‘there’s nothing the matter with you, you’re perfectly healthy, you can’t help being thin.’ And he used to send a photograph, ‘See, look how thin I am.’ But, apart from that there weren’t all that many.

**Okay. Thank you very much for letting us interview you today.**