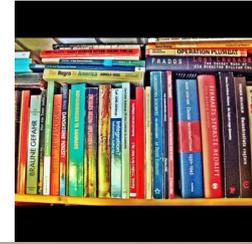




BOOK SHELF

Book reviews (22)



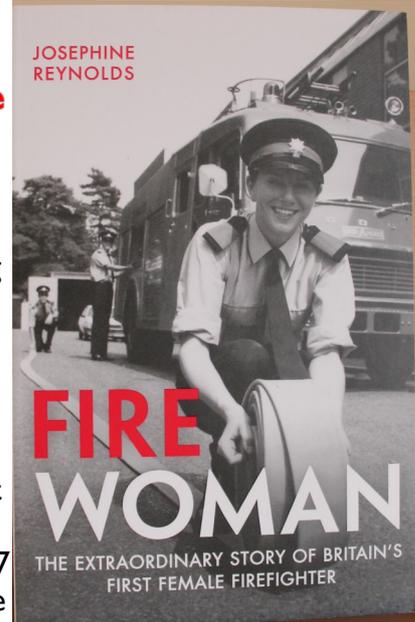
FIRE WOMAN

The Extraordinary Story of Britain's First Female Firefighter

Author : Josephine Reynolds

Reviewer : Ann Fitzgerald

When asked to review this corker of a book I must admit to being nervous as vivid memories of a former life came to the fore. I remember so well my late cousin, Monica Tovey (AFS & Swindon Fire Control) taking me to London in the spring of 1966 for an interview at London Fire Brigade HQ in Lambeth. The Brigade was recruiting to fill semi-operational posts for women, an initiative taken by the forward thinking CFO Leete. I had been in the AFS at Swindon and was desperate to be a “proper firewoman” but no such opportunities were on offer in Wiltshire. I sat as a nervous 17 year old in front of a board (bored!) of senior officers and a female Council official. They appeared more interested in my Wiltshire accent than my eagerness to be part of the new scheme. However,



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after a whole morning's wait I was successful in securing one of the positions. I was so thrilled and proud. I was whisked off to the London Council House Stores Department where I was fitted out with a pencil skirt, a la Hardy Amies, a man's white shirt and tie, a pair of men's heavy-weight trousers (size 42" waist) complete with fetching buttoned fly, for 'dirty work'. I felt like Coco the Clown but with Mary Quant make-up of the day. A dress jacket had to be tailored for me at the local 'Burtons', a size 12....oh, how I wish.

That's enough about me. Jo Reynolds was actually born in Cambridgeshire but spent her formative years in Pembrokeshire, West Wales. Coincidentally, I lived there for ten years. Jo was sixteen and a self-assured 'Goth', enjoying discos, pubs and boys but she had a burning desire to join the police force as a cadet. She worked hard at school to get the required qualifications. Sadly, no UK constabulary would give her an interview let alone a chance. In 1982, Jo's step father, a serving firefighter, heard that CFO Bruce Hogg of Norfolk Fire Service had set up a scheme to bring the fire service in line with the other emergency services. He proposed a fire cadet course aimed at 16 year old school leavers. The course was 15 months duration

Jo applied and survived a gruelling interview and assessment process to win a place on the course. She was very happy, but this was short-lived. She was the only female among 49 men on the course and life for her became tough and lonely. Her fellow fire cadets and two instructors were openly hostile. However, Jo was spirited and pulled herself together to make a big effort to socialise with those testosterone loaded men. Jo never let go of her femininity and self respect and the female cook on Thetford Fire Station where she was posted took her under her wing. The book records some of the challenging operational incidents that Jo attended. Do get hold of a copy of this book to read a full account of Jo's pioneering work as a female firefighter.