

From a Whisper to a Roar

Interview Summary	
Name: Diana Souhami	Date: 03/01/20 Age: 79
Key issues: Wartime Britain. Judaism. Lesbian. The BBC. Writing. Novels. Butch/Femme. The Gateways. Sex Work. Labels.	
Narrative summary <p>Diana starts by talking about the changes in society that she's seen throughout her lifetime. She was born into a Jewish family in London in 1940 during the Blitz and she describes this as not being a very relaxing start; she has very vivid memories of the war. She talks about how she could not articulate the whole concept of being a lesbian in her early life. She got a scholarship to the City of London School for Girls, but she never felt like she fitted in there; she used to play truant.</p> <p>She talks about having crushes on teachers and other women, but not really knowing what to do about it. It hadn't occurred to her that she could act on these feelings. Diana dated men which she describes as easy – she got on well with men and boys. She fell in love with a woman, at 23, when she was in her first job, but she physically couldn't do anything about it. She moved to Israel to work and get over her and she finally came out to someone she met there who became a close friend.</p> <p>Diana found that writing was a way of dealing with things; with insult, homophobia and emotions that she couldn't express. She worked at the BBC. She'd had plays put on the radio, short stories published, book and theatres reviews. And then Pandora Press contacted her asking her to write a book for them; they wanted to publish her. She wrote a biography of the lesbian painter Gluck's, inspired by her famous painting 'YouWe', and she cites this as her big coming out. Not only was this very important to her on a personal level, but her work has been very meaningful to so many other queer women. She has written fourteen books in total; her themes being lesbians and islands.</p> <p>She talks about her romantic relationships, explaining that she was always looking for the intense love she'd felt for that first woman; but looking back she feels she didn't find it. She would go to the Gateways and pick up women, and have long 'sensible' relationships. She talks about the modern-day problems of labels and how she feels that they limit individuals. She doesn't care about being labelled Jewish or lesbian; to her they are just ways for other people to define you and put you into categories.</p>	
<i>Photo: Vera Jacquet</i>	Length of interview: 1hr 37 mins



Marguerite: Saying that this is Margaret McLaughlin and this is an interview for the From a Whisper to a Roar oral history project conducted by Opening Doors London and supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund. Today is Friday the 3rd of January, 2020 and I'm interviewing Diana Souhami. Am I pronouncing that correct?

Diana: Souhami.

Marguerite: Souhami. Right. Can I start? As a warmup, this will be an easy one. Can you just give me an overview about the interesting aspects and points of your life that you would like to share up until the present day?

Diana: Well, that's a big one to start.

Marguerite: Yes, just like that.

Diana: I think the interesting thing is that I'm old, really. I mean I'm 80 this year, which is an extraordinary age, so I've seen so much that's changed. When I grew up, I didn't know... I didn't use the word lesbian. There wasn't much literature, and there wasn't anyone to talk to about it. Certainly, it was unacceptable. To see things that have changed and can change, is one aspect of life where things have changed for the better, where people can be transparent, can be legal and can have a voice. So to see that is a huge encouragement for me. But for me, my way of coming out, if you'd like, was to write books. That was my way of finding my lesbian identity.

Marguerite: You were born in London?

Diana: I was born on a billiard table in the Crown and Anchor Edmonton.

Marguerite: Wow. Now that's a colourful start.

Diana: That is a good start. It was the first day of the Luftwaffe bombing London. The very first day, and they were bombing Edmonton.

Marguerite: Good Lord. How extraordinary.

Diana: My mother said that the doctor said to her, "It's mothers like you I feel sorry for." She and I were taken into the cellar of the pub. Her sister Sadie was married to the publican [crosstalk 00:02:45].

Marguerite: Absolutely amazing. So that would... I'll do the quick maths, 1940?

Diana: Yes. 25th of August, 1940. And it was the first day of the Luftwaffe dropping surprise bombs on London. My nick name, my father nicknamed me Doodlebug, which got shortened to Doodie. There are still people who call me D or Doodie.

Marguerite: Which sounds ever so sweet, but when you think...

Diana: Yes. Doodlebug sounds quite sweet doesn't it?

Marguerite: Exactly. Until you think about what those...

Diana: What was going on. Yes.

Marguerite: Exactly.

Diana: And I think for my mother, I was the third child. My oldest brother wasn't quite five. She had three children under five. There was the declaration of war, there was Hitler who was going to invade and gas the Jews and we were Jewish. It wasn't a relaxing start.

Marguerite: Well, no.

Diana: It's very, very different from now. Although we might be heading towards World War Three based on today.

Marguerite: But the idea of bombs raining from the sky in London.

Diana: Yes. But my early memories were of war. You know, I had a gas mask, but for little children they made them look like an elephant's trunk.

Marguerite: Oh, how sweet.

Diana: My brothers, they were evacuated. I was far too small to be evacuated, so I went to school about by the time I was three, four, because there were no children in London. But yes, my memories of the war were vivid. And that was childhood. And it was very anxious-making.

Marguerite: Yes, absolutely.

Diana: I think it builds an anxiety into people of my generation.

Marguerite: How could it not?

Diana: How could it not? Yes. And even now if I hear those Weeping Willies, the sound, I can feel that cringe of fear, you go to the air raid shelter.

Marguerite: And London would have been a place with lots of damage in the streets.

Diana: Yes, yes. We had an air raid shelter. [crosstalk 00:05:04]

Marguerite: Literally bomb sites.

Diana: Yes, well, the Barbican was built on a bomb site. Because this whole area was bombed. It was an extraordinary time, really. When the sirens went, we'd go through a Judas gate in the fence and into the air raid shelter. And rationing. People talk about austerity now, but I think the austerity of rationing was so huge, do you know. It really was. So those memories. But then 1945, there was a Labour government, and the whole idea of a generous welfare state. So then came free school, free travel, free glasses, free orange juice.

Marguerite: Health.

Diana: Free health service. And all that wonderful idea of the benign state that would help you and see you through.

Marguerite: After so many years of very hard times.

Diana: Of very hard times. I mean, I can remember when sweets came off the ration when I was eight. 1948, they gave [inaudible 00:06:26]. Getting going and actually buying some sweets. I think I had a very difficult relationship with my mother. But how hard it must have been for her.

Marguerite: Absolutely.

Diana: How hard it must have been for her, bringing up a family.

Marguerite: Did your brothers have an all right time in being evacuated, or did they have a difficult time with who they were with?

Diana: They were sent to Wales, Mark and Robert. The only document that I found of that time was a letter from my brother Mark saying, "Yesterday, I put on Ruth's knickers. Thank you for your food parcel. It lowered my expectations. Please send a bit of cake." So I don't know whether they had... Children were packed off. Children were considered parcels!

Marguerite: And it was a lottery, who you were sent to.

Diana: It was a lottery. Well no, they went to a relative, an aunt.

Marguerite: Oh, right. Oh, good. I hope.

Diana: But I think if you stayed in London, it was a time of anxiety.

Marguerite: Of course.

Diana: Anxiety was palpable.

Marguerite: But having the responsibility for three children, two of whom were out of your sight for their safety, and then a tiny one.

Diana: That's right.

Marguerite: To say nothing of all the emotional upheaval of being the focus and target.

Diana: The target of fascism.

Marguerite: Absolutely.

Diana: Yes. My mother's mental health was always a problem, but the provocation must have been terrible.

Marguerite: Absolutely.

Diana: And they married so young, do you know, and under such strictures of relationship, do you know? I mean now of course it's wonderful that people have freedom of a range of relationship, but the expectation was if you were a woman, you married and had babies. That was so widespread, wasn't it? Sod it about a career or independence or... That's what you did. That's what you did. Is that a beginning?

Marguerite: Yes. And what happened next? As you began to separate from your family?

Diana: Are we fast forwarding now?

Marguerite: No, not necessarily. In terms of making your own life and creating... As you grew older.

Diana: There was a third brother who was born in 1948, so I was the only girl with three brothers. I'm always interested in where you come in the sibling range, being the third. The first child is usually the responsible one, and you find it again and again, a sense of responsibility in the oldest child. I think I was always bagging third. Do you know, my brothers were competitive and clever, so there'd be

bags first, bags second, and I'd say bags third. And I had no option whatsoever to be bags third, and I was bewildered why that made people laugh.

Marguerite: But it sounds very strategic because of the realism of it.

Diana: Well it didn't seem to me to be unwise to bags third because I hated competitive things. One was bagsing first, one was bagsing second, I was bagsing third. It didn't seem to me silly. That's what I was doing. But it was laughed at. I had no option but to be third.

Marguerite: But you were a girl.

Diana: I was *the* girl.

Diana: I was the girl. I think it did shape my thinking, but it was different. It was very different to be a girl.

Diana: I remember my mother saying to me much later, "It's a man's world." The whole thing of being lesbian, it was a total inarticulate thing for me as a child. Crush it, I had a crush on, Dr. V a teacher at school, secondary school, which is a fast forward. I got a scholarship to the City of London School for Girls.

Marguerite: So you were very tied to this area.

Diana: Now the school is in the Barbican. It was in Carmelite Street then. And they had a quota. There was a quota, I think, of 25 Jewish girls.

Marguerite: Gosh. Was that [inaudible 00:11:50] awareness to do with the war?

Diana: It was just a quota. There was a Jewish quota. I don't know what the rationale behind it was. Maybe the feeling they would overrun the place... You know what the Jews are like. But it was a very separate thing. Again, it was another thing of being different. So I was different by virtue of being a girl. The only girl. I was different by virtue of being Jewish. Also my parents weren't rich. Most of the girls were fee paying. I'd got a County grant there, so I think there were only three of us on scholarship in my year... I would've done better if I'd gone to an ordinary grammar school, so it was the sense of being not special, although something about me, I think I did think I was special. I had to, because no one else was thinking it.

Marguerite: But you were the girl. That made you special, surely.

Diana: That made me special. But I think the trouble was at home, there was always anxiety around everything you did, and I can remember seeing my brother when I'd got this scholarship, I was coming home and met my brother Robert who said to me that I'd got the scholarship, but he said, "Don't let mother know I've told you, because she'll want to tell you." So my whole anxiety when I went to the house was that she would know that my brother had told me. That was the atmosphere of home. It wasn't something you could burst in through the door being pleased about. It was always that thing of what you were doing, you had to be careful about and you are going to be criticised for it. So that was the atmosphere. And I think it was very spoiling, because you should be able to say... It didn't matter who tells you, does it? You just go in and you're glad.

Marguerite: Well yes, the spontaneity of joyful occurrence that somehow has to be managed and controlled.

Diana: Yes. You obviously identify with that a bit, do you? Or you can understand it?

Marguerite: I can understand it for sure.

Diana: Yes. But that was definitely... And I think that the internalising of that, whatever your news, you must be careful about it. And you must watch how you say things. And the fact that it wasn't a kind family. It was a clever family, but not a kind one.

Marguerite: Right. How did you feel about a girls' school since you had come from a family of brothers, of all boys in house, and then suddenly you were in an atmosphere of girls, mind you not kind there either, I suspect.

Diana: Right, well you weren't allowed to talk on the stairs. You mustn't eat in the street. I remember that the Lord Mayor used to come on Prize Day, and you had to cheer the Lord Mayor and the head girl would say... At the city, we always say, "Hip, hip, hoorah" and not hurray. So there's a sort of awful sense of...

Marguerite: Done and not done. Us and them.

Diana: Yes. And that we were in some way... The school's song had terrible words about God and queen and sisters. It was awful, really. Really Trumpish in a sense of superiority. I wasn't happy there. I wasn't happy there.

Marguerite: Were you bullied?

Diana: No, I was the form wag. I was naughty. I played truant. We lived in West Hampstead, and I'd go to school at Blackfriars. I would go on the train, and instead of getting off at Blackfriars, I would get off at Temple and walk along the river. Those were my good moments, walking by the river, walking through the temple. When girls were talking about boyfriends, I sort of knew how boys talked about girls, which was how far would they go, whereas girls were talking about these rather wonderful boys.

Diana: It was different, different views. I also through my brothers, I think, learned about male masculine vulnerability, and when they were having exams, how worried they'd get, and how they mustn't show their worries, how they must be brave about things that were very difficult for them. Only in adult life did I realise that the things that troubled me were very troubling to them as well. Now... my eldest brother died. My other brother, who I was very close to, we sort of brought each other up really, but we don't speak now. It's almost like an affair ended. He married my best friend, and I don't know... I actually could not articulate what the separation is about because it's not clear to me.

Diana: But that's what it is. I think it was my mother and how she didn't manage in old age. It became very devisive. Oh, and writing. That's terrible. They say that once you've got a writer in the family, you have no family. I mean there was a book of mine where this brother

that I was very close to did sort of write me a very stern letter threatening legal action. The book's called Coconut Chaos. It's one of my favourite ones. I think it's quite humorous. It's funny. But because I used the first person, that didn't mean it was me, but of course there's always aspects of you in everything you write. But I think they didn't discriminate between what's literally true and what's literarily true. And he wrote threatening legal action. So if I write a memoir, I'll be too old to care.

Marguerite: So did you find comfort in writing early on? Where were your places of shelter? I can...

Diana: As a child?

Marguerite: Well, yes, or as a young person, very young woman. I have the image now of you walking along the river, and that being a pleasurable and joyful thing.

Diana: That was and I always had friends at school, and I was witty. I had a crush on the history teacher. I don't know at what point one knows one's a lesbian. There wasn't sufficient reference. I knew that I loved the history teacher, and then I knew later on that I loved other women, but I would never have dreamed of doing anything about it for a long, long time because this thing of being inarticulate about true feeling was deep, absolutely deep. So even when I went to university, I think it was a woman... I better not saying names.

Marguerite: Yeah, preferable that you don't, but if by accident you say a name, we can remove it.

Diana: You'll wipe them out, yes.

Marguerite: Unless you're sure that someone wouldn't mind.

Diana: Yes, exactly. No, I think that's best. There is no permission. But again, this feeling of sheer admiration, but not... It would not have occurred to me that I could make any overture, or that it could be consequential in any way. It had to be an intuned feeling that was beyond expression, but was actually the fundamental core of who I was. How wonderful that all that has changed, that people can [crosstalk 00:21:49].

Marguerite: Absolutely.

Diana: Because that's what it is, is love, isn't it? You feel this huge, passionate attraction, desire, worship of another person. But you mustn't... You are silenced about it. That was how I grew up, that my deepest feelings were within me.

Marguerite: And no heterosexual distractions?

Diana: Oh God, yes, I went out with boys, but that was easy. That was easy. I think that it probably remains easier. I mean, most men, they want to be liked. And that is really quite simple. Because I didn't care that much. I got on rather well with boys. I did when I was at university fall for the first man that I slept with. And he was much older than I was. I remember him coming up to me in the refectory and saying, "Will you break bread with me tonight, Miss. Souhami?" Has it

stopped going around? Have I got to start all over again? [query about the recording]

Marguerite: Nope, it's fine. I heard a little beep.

Diana: I think it was my watch.

Marguerite: Yes, that's why I was just checking.

Diana: It's my watch. Sorry about that.

Marguerite: No problem.

Diana: He was a psychologist. I was very taken with him. I thought he was very beautiful. I thought he looked like a Modigliani face. But I didn't know how to behave. When I did go out with him, he said he'd only asked me out because I was wearing dungarees. And of course when he'd asked me to go out, I went home and changed into a skirt and got myself all poshed up and that wasn't what he wanted.

Marguerite: You went all girly.

Diana: He'd wanted the dungarees and the old bicycle.

Marguerite: Interesting.

Diana: Yes. And then I went out with men, and then I fell in love in the first job that I had. Am I fast forwarding too much, or does it not matter?

Marguerite: It's your choice.

Diana: This is the sort of stuff you want?

Marguerite: Yes.

Diana: It is?

Marguerite: I will quite soon ask about the intersection of your life and your writing.

Diana: Yes. Then I fell in love with a woman when I was in my first job.

Marguerite: So how old would you have been?

Diana: 23.

Marguerite: Okay. So we're talking early swinging sixties?

Diana: Yes. She asked me to go to lunch, and I sat opposite her. And then it was summer, and I was wearing sandals and suddenly I felt these feet on mine.

Marguerite: Nice.

Diana: I didn't know what to do. And then she asked me... Do you know those things, the interdents tooth cleaning sticks?l [inaudible 00:25:25]?

Marguerite: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Yeah.

Diana: We were in a room, and we used these little interdens things and I said, "Don't they make your mouth feel clean?" She was on the other side of the room and she said, "Yes, and eminently kissable won't you kiss me, Diana." And I can see it now, but I couldn't have crossed the room. I think if she'd just sort of come up to me, it would've been all right, but because she made it that it had to be my decision, I couldn't make it.

Marguerite: Yes. Besides, the courage to say that much was probably as much as she had in that moment.

Diana: Well, she was about 10 years older than I. She'd been married, she'd had affairs with women. She knew things, or could act in a way that I was paralysed about. And then we went to Greece together. We booked rooms .. And one night there was only a double bed, and I remember saying, "We're bed mates, after all." But I wouldn't sleep with her. I couldn't. I couldn't. I don't know why, but I couldn't do it, looking back. And then I left the country, because I was so in love with her. I wanted to go to America, but I went to Israel because I had no money. I went to Israel. I only had thirty pounds. I went to get over her.

Diana: And then I met my best friend, who isn't lesbian, and I sort of told her all this. It was the first time I'd actually told anybody about all the things that were on my mind. We're still friends. But then when I came back, I met this woman in the street. She'd by then married a famous playwright, not going to say a name.

Diana: I met her in the street and told her I'd been in love with her. She said, "I was in love with you as well, but I didn't know what you wanted from me."

Marguerite: Such a shame.

Diana: That was then. That was then, and thank goodness it isn't like that. Thank goodness it isn't.

Marguerite: Absolutely. Now all you have to do is look at the television, and there are women kissing on car ads in the rain.

Diana: Yes, and there's a vocabulary. There's a vocabulary, and a license and permission, but I didn't have that. I didn't have it. I'm so glad...then you know, writing was really... I don't know what my life would've been if I hadn't written. It started that I... So again, I'm jumping... Oh yes, then I had a disastrous first relationship with a woman where she was... you know the Fatal Attraction film? It was that. It was that, and this woman. Maybe I couldn't have gotten into bed with a woman if it wasn't like her. But she, apparently, she said she looked at me, and she said to herself, "I want that." Me, and she was a psychopath, really. I thought she would kill me. I went to bed with her, and I knew from the very first... Then I went home feeling rather sort of pleased, almost this was a milestone. But then that evening, she turned up at my flat with some excuse and then I couldn't get out of it. And I was into something that was really quite terrible.

Diana: In the end, I took out an injunction against her. I was working at the BBC, she was plaguing me at the BBC. I'd go out of the house and she'd be there; in the end she killed herself.

Marguerite: How terrible.

Diana: I thought she would kill me. I really did think she would kill me as well. So that wasn't a good beginning, was it?

Marguerite: No. Quite dramatic, as well.

Diana: It was very dramatic. And I haven't faced that time.

Marguerite: Dramatic and traumatic.

Diana: Traumatic. Yes. I haven't faced that time full-on because it was so awful. My weight went down to six and a half stone. I had a hospital admission, it was dire. Absolutely dire. And that I think is another price of concealment. And if people are spared that now, wonderful. They don't have to be at the mercy of someone who is manipulative because they can make their own decisions. I think I didn't have the courage to be who I was.

Marguerite: But women are conditioned not to be active in that way, and certainly not active in terms of a sexuality. Sexuality is something that kind of is brought to you through male attention.

Diana: Yes. You wait to be asked.

Marguerite: Exactly, and if you're not wanting that form of a life, then there is a vacuum of what to do.

Diana: Well, that historically it was like that. I think it isn't like that now, and how wonderful that women assert themselves and say what they want and what they don't want, and of course, Me Too, which affects us all. It's a very, is absolutely the resistance to that. That's the ultimate resistance, that you won't be imposed on... But it isn't true that all lesbian relationships are hunky dory. There's a lot of trouble in lesbian relationships.

Marguerite: Well, there's the same amount of domestic violence statistically as there is in the heterosexual world.

Diana: Yes, which is...

Marguerite: And it still isn't spoken about very much at all.

Diana: No, and I think that it should be.

Marguerite: Absolutely.

Diana: It should be. Because the path towards it has often been very difficult.

Marguerite: Exactly.

Diana: There's been so much going against what's expected, what's wanted, what's commended. I used to go to the, Gay's the Word, lesbian

discussion group, and the one thing that came again and again was Coming Out. And everybody's stories... It's hard. It's hard, because you're saying things to people they don't want to hear. I can remember... My mother saying when I came back from Israel, she said, "Ever since you've come back from Israel, you've preferred the company of women to men."

Diana: To which I said, "Well, what if I have?" She said, "Well, I can't say I like it very much." That's standard, isn't it? Don't like it. None of us wants to say things that other people don't want to hear.

Marguerite: Absolutely.

Diana: It doesn't earn you any...

Marguerite: In particular, your own mother.

Diana: Particularly your own mother. There was another one... And this was where writing came in because then they make wonderful... I started off writing plays, and it's wonderful dialogue, this sort of stuff. There was another one at the time of the Jeremy Thorpe affair, and in the garden with my... Again, these things of being able to see the situation of things that you remember, so I can see the garden when this happened. And my youngest brother was saying...

Diana: They were talking about Jeremy Thorpe and that scandal, the shooting of the dog of the lover. My youngest brother saying, "I have nothing against homosexuals. I just don't want them running the country." My mother said, "And neither do I." And they knew by that time that I was lesbian, and so I blurted]. You can't separate someone's sexual identity from their abilities. But it's useless. But the nice thing is that when I started writing... I started off writing radio plays. I wrote one called, A Horse called Gertrude Stein. Patricia Routledge was the mother in that. There's a Sunday lunch where the daughter says that she's lesbian. My father had made a remark about Gertrude Stein, "Wasn't she a dirty lesbian?" Well, you know, it's terrible to hear that, but it's very amusing when it's...

Marguerite: At the same time.

Diana: at the same time, when it's put into a context of a comedy. So in this play, a Horse Called Gertrude Stein... It was at Sunday lunch, and this married the brother and his fiancée, and the girl who's saying that she's lesbian. The father says, "Wasn't she a dirty lesbian?" About Gertrude Stein. And they're listing all the other people who are, and she says, "And me." And so there's a silence. Then Patricia Routledge, the mother, goes into this long monologue about the making of a baked Alaska. She's such a wonderful actor.

Marguerite: Oh yes, absolutely.

Diana: And it becomes very funny, because this is what you do with avoidance.

Marguerite: Oh, absolutely.

Diana: You talk about the baked Alaska.

Marguerite: Yeah. Or start doing the ironing or whatever.

Diana: Yes. I found that that was the beginning of writing. I found that this was a way of dealing with things, dealing with insult, dealing with emotions I couldn't express. Not going to the very heart of the difficult... Of pain. It was comedy I favoured. My big break with writing... I was working at the BBC, and at lunchtimes I used to go with a work colleague to... Is that thing still working? [referring to the recorder].

Marguerite: Oh, you know, it's fine. It's just my foot was about to go to sleep.

Diana: Do you want more coffee, or something?

Marguerite: I'm so busy listening that didn't realise my foot was asleep.

Diana: Can you use any of this?

Marguerite: Yes, of course. It's fascinating. I'm seeing a film in my mind.

Diana: Are you?

Marguerite: The way you speak about things, I can see.

Diana: Well, good. This colleague and I, lunchtimes at the BBC, we'd go into the galleries and... I was working in BBC publication.

Marguerite: Where was that based?

Diana: Marylebone High Street. And we'd go to the art galleries in Bond Street, and all down there you'd be looking... There was one on Gluck, the portrait painter Gluck. And I saw that YouWe painting of her and Nesta Obermer, and that was an iconic lesbian painting. And I knew what was going on. And it stayed in my mind. And then one day my bit of real luck, I suppose... I'd had plays put on radio, I'd had short stories published, in Arts Council anthologies, and I'd go in for prizes. I was slowly building towards it. And I was writing for City Limits book reviews and theatre reviews.

Diana: Then one day I got a letter saying, from the editor of Pandora Press, saying "I like your bits of journalism. Have you got a book?

Marguerite: They came to you?

Diana: They came to me.

Marguerite: Fantastic.

Diana: And I went in and it was a complete break. She said, "well, what you want to write? We'll publish it."

Marguerite: Fabulous. Carte blanche.

Diana: So I thought again of Gluck, and they gave me a commission. It was enough to leave the BBC. It was enough for me to see a year through.

Marguerite: That's amazing.

Diana: And I remember Gluck's nephew had all her papers. He was her executor, and he'd kept them all in the garage. I was living in a top-floor flat in Warwick Avenue, and he let me take all the papers. I took these boxes. And they smelled musty, and I kind of lugged them up to my top-floor flat, and I remember thinking, make a life out of that. With fear, because the boxes were of just dead papers. I started opening these papers, and I couldn't read the writing. They called each other things like, darling Tim, or dearest rabbit kinsnoochbunsnoo 00:40:21] or...

Marguerite: So you were having to decode.

Diana: But if you stare at something long enough, it begins to make sense. And gradually it became clear. And then there was this sort of strange feeling of deep intrusion, that you shouldn't be looking at people's private letters, or you shouldn't be looking at their diaries.

Diana: But I did. I made a life out of it, and it got reviewed. It got reviewed in posh papers. Oh yes, that was my big coming out. A journalists called Janet Watts came up to interview me. It was 9:00 in the morning. She came up, and the first thing she said to me was, "Are you a lesbian?" I've told this story before. I said to her, "Yes, but not at the moment." Because it's 9:00 in the morning. "You're not, are you? at 9:00 in the morning"

Diana: I wanted a cup of coffee. And the next thing she said to me was, "Are you Jewish?" And I said, "Yes, but I like crispy bacon." What's being Jewish? What's being lesbian? So of course in her piece in the Observer she wrote: Diana Souhami, like Hannah Gluckstein, this lesbian and jewish. So that's coming out, isn't it?

Marguerite: Well, yes, twice over. At this point, when you had such an amazing and pivotal moment happening for you, were you in a relationship? Had you found your community? Did you ever find or establish a community of such?

Diana: I went down the Gateways. I think that was a quite big thing for me to go down to Gateways.

Marguerite: What about the butch femme stuff? How did you navigate all of that?

Diana: I didn't really see it. I was afraid of the butch thing. I remember...

Marguerite: And was it as extreme as some people say?

Diana: No, it wasn't. I mean my first, I remember I was wearing a Biba dress.

Marguerite: Nice. Biba was great.

Diana: Yes, I can see it now. It was a sort of purpley thing with buttons all the way down the front. I was wearing a Biba dress and I went down there really with my heart in my mouth.

Marguerite: I'm sure.

Diana: This woman Gina who ran it, she looked diva-ish, and she looked rather like my mother. And I thought, God, my mother is the

madame of a lesbian bar. The first night I was there, three women came and talked to me, and they then asked me if I wanted to go for a cup of coffee. And I was so pleased that I was being taken notice of. So I went out for coffee with them and they were prostitutes. And they were going off to work in Soho. So this was very unlike the BBC.

Diana: And they were doing it for the money. I would never have known they were prostitutes. They were going off to work. And in fact I went with them to see them stripping in a club, and they were sex workers. So I had that to kind of get my mind around. It seemed very unsexy. You could see where their sun tans ended when they took their clothes off, and one had got a polystyrene cup of coffee.

Marguerite: So the world was sort of turning upside down, really.

Diana: The world was upside down.

Marguerite: You're a full-time writer. You've left the Beeb, you're exploring aspects of...

Diana: I wasn't a full time writer at that point. I was a part-time writer. It was later that I went... I think I was about 40 by the time I was a full-time writer. I was half and half writing. Then I started having sensible relationships that lasted six years, six years, six years, 10 years. I don't think I was ever helped by feeling part of the lesbian group. I saw the Gateways as a... I'd drink whiskey. I'd stand at the bar drinking whiskey. I'd pick people up. I saw myself as... I think I was still doing that thing of looking for the kind of intense love that I'd felt for the woman who married... The woman at university, the unattainable woman, I think was deeply in my psyche. If I look back on my life, that's been true. My relationships were... I didn't really find that. Although I'd be in love, I wasn't as in love as I had been when it was unreachable. So it was always possible to end the relationship.

Diana: I didn't have a strategy for how I wanted to live. I think one of the liberations of now is that you can have a strategy. You can think, "I want a partner. I want to live in a certain way. I want to be frank in a certain way." I didn't have that strategy. I went by how I felt without a plan, which meant that I left. Am I not describing it particularly well? Am I conveying anything? I don't know.

Marguerite: Yes. It's very interesting. And I don't mean that in a clinical way.

Diana: No.

Marguerite: Were you aware of those things at the time? Or is it looking back that you feel about the unattainability?

Diana: My thinking was created by reading, by literature. I'd go down to the Gateways and I'd have Hermann Hesse in my thinking. We have to go through so much 'dirt and humbug 'before we reach home'. That was one of the things that was ingrained in me. There was the Carson McCullers thing she talks about the 'we of me', this idea of you find your other half and that it's inevitable. I had the romantic feeling that there would be an inevitability of attraction. It didn't come into my thinking that to plan, to be strategic. If I were to give

advice to people now, I'd say be a bit strategic. Think of how you want to live your life and make some... Don't go off with somebody who's a psychopath. It's not good news. But there is a...

Marguerite: Don't we all have a psycho girlfriend in our history? Don't you reckon?

Diana: Yes, we do.

Marguerite: It's almost a bit of a...

Diana: A cliché.

Marguerite: Exactly.

Diana: Yeah. There's enough of them around.

Marguerite: The psycho ex.

Diana: The psycho ex. But I think the last relationship that I had here was bordering on that one again, and at that point I felt rather rejecting of myself or distrustful of myself, of my own makeup. Because it's always very easy to say what's wrong with the other person, the psycho ex, but why was my recognition towards things that would be damaging? Why?

Marguerite: It's an interesting question, actually. I've never thought of it this way. I must ask myself some day, to whom was I the psycho ex? Because as you say, it's 50/50...

Diana: Yes. It's a recognition. Or what is it that has created that recognition? I would say that I was probably quite a disturbed person. It wasn't just the war, it was having a problematic mother. You know.

Marguerite: Stuff.

Diana: Stuff, yes. I think all credit to us that we come through. Make a contribution of some kind and have a reasonably stable, if not deep down characters, reasonably stable performance. I don't owe any money to anyone. I bought this place. My head is above water. Nobody helped. So credit .. I've got 14 books.

Marguerite: Yes, absolutely.

Diana: So I do allow myself that now. But this perception of being at the mercy of what will happen, I think I have lived like that. I shouldn't... of the longterm relationships that I've had. One was with... I won't name them, but with sort of powerful, self-assertive women who've done well. My mistake was to leave, I think. Not to stay in and sort it. When the going got hard, I'd leave. There's one in particular, she was a psychiatrist. If I'd stayed with her, our life would have probably been all right. But I left because I was invited to give a talk, and the woman who was organising it who was the head of a college, sort of made a proposition to me, so I was weak. I didn't have a strategy, I remember the psychiatrist writing to me.

Diana: She said she'd give me three months, but I didn't have a strategy for living. I don't know whether I would deceive myself, this idea that it would all come right. Now, I'm eighty. It's not going to all come right, you know. Do I have regrets? I think I was a child of my time. I was a child of my time, and I've made a contribution to gay rights, lesbian rights. I've made a contribution.

Marguerite: You certainly have. You've made a lot of people, a lot of women visible in a way that they hadn't been, and that's been very meaningful to a lot of people.

Diana: Well I think the nicest thing that has been for me, not what the critics might have said, and I have got quite a lot of praise and won prizes, but the nicest thing was, there was a Scottish woman who's now very successful, and she told me how actually reading the book Gluck changed her life.

Marguerite: Exactly. There are people who say that about your work.

Diana: That that makes me feel good. It does.

Marguerite: And you are a consistently big seller in places like Gay's the Word. There is a regular clientele for your work. As the generations progress...

Diana: Thirty years on from when I wrote this stuff.

Marguerite: Exactly. That's a hell of a contribution.

Diana: It is a contribution, but... My life isn't a beacon of how to be. It's not at all. I needed...I would have liked to have found something that would... I have no regrets. I am at peace with myself, actually.

Marguerite: Did you want to be swept away?

Diana: Yes, of course I did. Of course I did. And that's how I have acted. I remember a colleague of mine at the BBC saying that I was always in love with someone. And that's what I thought... Again, the romantic things of people like Carson McCuller... The romantic writing, the idea that in some way your destiny would be there, and that how you felt... I do think how you feel matters. Very hard to go against a strong and powerful feeling, or to live your life contrary to your feelings, to live your life according to what you think. We don't.

Marguerite: Well hopefully not.

Diana: Well we can't. Or if we can, it doesn't ring true.

Marguerite: I think a lot of people struggle, and I think a lot of very intelligent, educated women of the world struggle with becoming what I would call heads on legs and losing all touch with the rest in terms of emotion.

Diana: And I think that's true, but a dose of a head doesn't hurt. A bit of a head doesn't hurt.

Marguerite: Well you need the heart, too. You don't get rid of the head, but you want the rest of the body in between the head and the legs.

Diana: I think that's true, but I think looking back on it, there was a level on which I was fucked up.

Marguerite: Who isn't?

Diana: It's my privilege to be able to look back on it, because it's been such different times. So I can talk about the war and talk about a mother who wasn't a mother. I can talk about a father who was... I can talk about not good parenting, no advice, no beacons. Not really.

Diana: So it was a strange trajectory to go from one impulse to another, and from one person to another. Also, I think that when one is in a relationship, you find out your faults. You find out how difficult you are. I wouldn't say that I was easy. I think the mood of the moment takes over for me to an extent. It's not particularly good.

Marguerite: Do you become completely immersed in the books that you write? Are you hard to access when you're creating in that way?

Diana: I think that writing has, although it's been a huge thing and the one thing I'm probably most proud of, it's also been a worry. It's not like picking up your knitting. I have very poor powers of concentration.

Marguerite: Really?

Diana: Yeah. I'm terrible. Utterly easily distracted. I worry about if anybody says to me, "Do you want a cup of tea?" I hate it, sitting down. It's the sitting down thing that bothers me. It's easier now, but it's been hugely difficult for me to sit down and write these things. But you can't go far away from it. And it's not just the point in time when you're writing. You need a space around you in order to be able to do this.

Marguerite: Yeah, of course.

Diana: And to get it right, I think there has to be a kind of surrender to it to give to it for it to work. You can't just do that. You can't. It's much easier to do the washing up. It is much easier.

Marguerite: But there's 14 of them. There's 14, and two more are on their way. One imminent, and then another one coming.

Diana: No. The one that's imminent is the 14th. And then the one after that will be the last.

Marguerite: Maybe.

Diana: Although there is... I have written about, my two subjects being lesbians and islands. I've written books about islands.

Marguerite: Yes, I noticed that. It doesn't point it out explicitly on Wikipedia, but it's funny, there's a funny almost aside saying something about, "and then she returned to islands again." And I thought, "Oh, funny. Yes, that's true." from the account of what comes before in the Wikipedia listing. It's like, oh yeah, there are a couple of islands things, so yes, I suppose you can say, "She's returning to the islands theme."

Diana: I mean I wrote this book Selkirk's Island. Selkirk was a...

Marguerite: Robinson Crusoe.

Diana: I got the Whitbread prize for that. They wouldn't give me the Whitbread prize I suppose for writing about lesbians. I wondered about that, because I'm not sure. And then I wrote this book Coconut Chaos, which is about Pitcairn Island, and there is a sense in which I'd like to write a third island book so I'd have a trilogy. So if I do keep on going without having totally lost my marbles, I would quite like to write a book called The Third Island. But I think there is a sort of parallel between being lesbian and islands. Or my being a lesbian. I've not been a very good group lesbian.

Marguerite: Right, because I did want to ask you about the whole gay rights movement, lesbian visibility, feminism, all of those activisms. You have... I don't know how to describe it. It seems obvious to me that there's an activist aspect of you that comes out in what you write about, and of course we've been saying that in the course of this interview. But were you part of that other than your own way of doing it in writing? In other words, were you a joiner of any of those things?

Diana: No, I haven't been a joiner, but I do see it and link it to being part of the tolerance world. My political thinking, social thinking is utterly, utterly feminism, civil liberties...

Marguerite: Self-actualization.

Diana: Racial liberties. But I haven't... I'm not good at being, you know, the sort of Groucho Marx thing any club that would have me as a member... I'm not good at that, I don't think. Except that I am... I would tell anybody that I was lesbian, but for a long time I perhaps wouldn't, because again, this thing of how hard it... I don't like saying things that people don't want to hear. If people really don't want to hear it, I don't particularly want to say it. I mean I work at the London library now, and I tell people who don't want to hear it, but I then measure with my senses the space that it creates and in a sense suffer that space, which is an uncomfortable feeling, and something that we go through in our apartness I think.

Diana: You know, there are neighbours in the Barbican I perhaps wouldn't necessarily want to... I wouldn't not say it, but in my demeanour, I don't particularly want to advertise myself as belonging to a particular group. Although perhaps I do now. Perhaps it's quite obvious. I don't know how much... We don't know what we look like.

Marguerite: Well, what's interesting as well though straight people don't tell you they're straight. You meet them, and you eventually see through progressive unveiling of the self that the person is straight or heterosexual, whatever. And I think it can be an interesting and impactful thing to not feel that one has to declare, but to allow people to see and learn and recognise.

Diana: Yes. And also, one can be different things. I sometimes think the writing is like an acting ability. I think there's probably a lot of me that is an actor, that I would have probably really liked to have been an actor. This inhabiting of another. And in writing, I spend most of my time with people who aren't there. Weird, isn't it?

Marguerite: I haven't thought of it that way.

Diana: In this book I've just written, I do do a disclaimer at the beginning about the QUILTBAG thing, saying that I can't do it, that I've used the word lesbian. And what's interesting, because in this book I've taken four different women, and I suppose one of them, Bryher will be called the transgendered, one would be called lesbian... They will be given different initials. But the important thing is not the initials; it's that they are all so different, and that only by going deeply into who they are do you see who they are. It certainly doesn't help to say lesbian, transgendered, pansexual, it doesn't help.

Marguerite: Vegan.

Diana: Vegan. It doesn't help. You don't get there with that huge feeling of having resurrected someone or created someone. It's not creative enough. It's not creative enough. And that's why for a long time I hated labels of any sort, because they so diminish, or then those expectations. Like my father was saying, "Oh, she's a dirty lesbian, Gertrude Stein."

Marguerite: Yes, because as soon as you use that, it releases expectations of who you are and how you will behave. Including, for example, things like, if you're a lesbian then you must hate men or that kind of nonsense.

Diana: That's right. You feed into preconception. And because I suppose it's taken me a long time to know what it is, even if I now know it, about my being a lesbian, as the same thing with Jewish. I'm Jewish because I would've gone to a concentration camp. I don't believe in a Jewish God, I don't, I don't go to synagogue. What does it mean?

Marguerite: Although it does have some very powerful things of meaning, in terms of through a female line, that you are Jewish because your mother is Jewish or was Jewish.

Diana: Yes, but that's not *my* identity. Or it's so complex that the word, the one word... I would never deny that I was Jewish. And in fact, as I'm pleased to see and would want the company of women who are lesbian, I'm pleased to... I feel the familiarity, this thing of recognition with psychopaths. I feel a familiarity with Jewish identity. The reductive humour, the facial expressions sometimes of people. I can have a sense of, I know where I am with you, that I wouldn't perhaps feel with somebody who had different characteristics. So I don't deny it, but I don't... This being defined by initialism has gone to ridiculous proportion.

Diana: I'm not going to start calling Virginia Woolf cis-gender, or using the pronoun "they" when it's utterly confusing and doesn't come naturally to me. So I think we should all be able to say what we want.

Marguerite: Absolutely.

Diana: And if I use the word lesbian, it doesn't mean that there isn't the whole spectrum of identity within that silly word or wonderful word. But the assumption of being in some way forced by your initialism is ridiculous. Don't you find it irritating?

Marguerite: Yes. And for me, in a way, although I feel that my lesbian identity is a very powerful thing because I've lived in this country for so long, my identity as an American, because other people hear it as soon as I open my mouth, is much more every day than my lesbianism is, because hardly a day has gone by in 40 years that people don't ask me where I'm from, or make some acknowledgement of that. And I say to my American friends, "I am far more inhabiting of my American identity than you are, because it is an issue of every day. Now I'm lucky that mostly I encounter people liking it, particularly because it's a New York accent. It's not Texas, or whatever. And I think if I had encountered a lot of people who disliked it, I probably would've lost more of it than I have, but it's a stronger identity on a day-to-day basis, which is very ironic.

Diana: Yes. Well you need to safeguard it. It is strange how defined... I suppose me, if you say your name's Souhami, people say, "Where are you from?" And start shouting at you in case you don't speak English. It's a foreign name, isn't it?

Marguerite: What is the background?

Diana: It's a Sephardic Jewish name.

Marguerite: Oh, of course.

Diana: In fact, they were the Shuamites in the bible. They were one of the lost tribes. But you can trace the trajectory of where they left Egypt and went to Spain, at the time of the Spanish Inquisition, they were shoved out of Spain, went to the Ottoman Empire. So on my mother's side, it was a different trajectory. It's interesting how the mother's side gets lost, because you don't take your mother's name. It's another conspiracy, isn't it, to silence women, make them invisible.

Marguerite: In spite of the incredibly powerful role of the mother. It is deeply ironic.

Diana: Yes. I find it in myself that I would trace the Souhami, or defend the Souhami thing, but not my mother's side, which was from Poland, Russian refugees. There are strange things that we get our heads around of who we are.

Diana: I don't see any point in being Jewish or lesbian if it isn't part of a more tolerant world. That's what I would hope in everything I write, really. I think...coming from 1940 to 2020, and today's news, my deepest disappointment is that war is still an acceptable way of resolving, or the way of resolving conflict.

Marguerite: Well the swing to the right is just terrifying because it's so global.

Diana: It's so global. It's so dangerous. We don't know where we're going. That is a hugely sad thing, but in terms of gay rights here in this privileged place at this time, it's better. I do think it true...

Marguerite: Things changed enormously, and I would never have believed how much a change in the law would lead to social change, but just the sheer ability to first have a civil partnership, and then have a marriage, meant it pulled loads of ordinary families into a very different world where it was quite easy to recognise that there is

only one love. Human beings love each other, and there isn't that much difference. There might be political differences as to the way you want to live your life, but even those, actually, I think are fading. There is a lot of assimilation in the gay community that I find problematic. I don't want a house, a car, 2.5 kids.

Diana: No, I agree.

Marguerite: And a dog. I want the alternative as well.

Diana: I agree with you. I mean, I also.. the thing about gay marriage..of course I'm for gay marriage for people who want to marry, but also if you don't want to, the right to be other. And also the fact of oversimplifying it. The idea that we're all these happy bunnies now that we can all be who we are, and not facing the chaos of it or the pain of it or the struggle or how deeply alternative and troubling it can be. All the whole... That it's meretricious not to say that it's difficult.

Diana: And this thing of .. of course ...please don't misinterpret me. Of course I'm glad of all the rights that there are, but the expectation that everybody should have a partner... You don't have to have a partner. You really don't have to have a partner. [crosstalk 01:16:15]

Marguerite: To me, it's the Noah's Ark model. We don't all need to be two by two going up the ramp.

Diana: Nor should we be ashamed at our failures, if you like, at our struggle, at who we are. I think in some ways it's less interesting than those times of going to the Gateways where it was a sort of meat market and everybody was wanting to pick somebody up. And now, everyone's in their trainers and knows everybody else, and we're happy. We're happy lesbians going with our backpacks on a day's outing. It doesn't have... Do you know?

Marguerite: Yes, I do. One of the things that's been very interesting to speak to people about in terms of this project is the ideology that you shouldn't just be in one relationship at a time that's monogamous, and that the assumption is because you're in a relationship, that person belongs to you, and that you can't relate to other people as well, either considering it or labelling it non-monogamy or now polyamory, all of those sorts of things. Lots of interesting discussion over the attempts to create a different way.

Diana: Yes. I feel conflicting things there, because I think people are what they are and you're not going to govern it, but I also think there probably are two pillows on a bed and that attempts at... Jealousy is a very strong thing.

Marguerite: Of course it is.

Diana: If you're in a relationship, I still feel a disdain about cheating. In all the books that I've written, it's predictable how people are going to respond when there's deception, when she goes off with someone else. They're not going to like it. They're going to become very florid in their behaviour. They're going to break down. Do you know? Who needs to go through all that? It's not good.

Marguerite: It's always easier for oneself than for someone you are in a loving partnership with. Non-monogamy, if it works, tends to work for oneself, but not exactly in facing jealousy of the other.

Diana: Exactly. Or what you're creating or the falseness of the power. I don't like it, and I feel judgmental about it. But, judgemental and accepting.

Marguerite: But some men seem to manage it. Long, long, loving partnerships.

Diana: Yes, of course they do, but look at them. You look at the Boris Johnsons, and they... There's something tawdry about deception, I think.

Marguerite: But you see, if it's negotiated, it need not be deception.

Diana: Oh, I don't know.

Marguerite: Men in open relationships, I think. But it's the ability to separate emotion and sex.

Diana: Yes. Whatever gets you through the night. I I do feel that. I know that I don't want to be tested to the limit of my emotional tolerances, because I know I'm not particularly good at it. I don't want it. I really don't like it. So we find out what we can put up with. Some people are tougher than others, and perhaps more solid than others. We have to learn whatever... I think I've been serially monogamous. That's what I've been, but I have left. I have left. I've never kept... I've not kept two people going at the same time. I don't want to, either. I mean, one is more than enough.

Marguerite: Especially as one gets older. There's just not the energy, quite honestly. It eventually solves itself in a way.

Diana: Now, I quite like being on my own..I do wistfully think, could I... You know, like one more book maybe. I always say this is the last one. Maybe I could do one more book. Could I have one more? No, I don't want another affair. I don't think I'll have another one. Maybe. Sometimes I can imagine going back in time to past people. But do I want the unmet person? I don't know. I don't think I do want the unmet person.

Marguerite: You never know. You might get swept away. Is there anything I haven't asked you? Is there anything, issues, bits that floated through your mind, but you were saying something else? Is there anything we haven't covered? Are there things in looking back and speaking of these things that...

Diana: I don't think so. I think you've got enough there, haven't you?

Marguerite: There's never enough if there's more to be had.

Diana: I don't know. I know it's not being sort of linear. I have a sort of hopped around a bit from being born on a billiard table to being an octogenarian in the Barbican.

Marguerite: Indeed. Six pockets. That's a lot to put on one tee shirt.

Diana: Yes. Have I got any more to say? I don't think so [crosstalk 01:22:53].

Marguerite: There's nothing burning that has been uncovered?

Diana: There wasn't anything that I was burning to say in the first place.

Marguerite: Well I really appreciate you giving your time to the project.

Diana: I mean I think it's a good project. And I hope that there's something that's useful. I don't know.

Marguerite: Oh, it'll be very useful.

Diana: What do you do with this stuff? [inaudible 01:23:22] Do you edit it?

Marguerite: I will say, "Thank you." And what I'll do is I'll stop us.