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Author

Born 1943.

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1. Parents

My grandparents were all refugees from the antisemitic pogroms in Russia at the turn of the 19th-20th centuries. They had arranged marriages. My paternal grandparents did not get on, and my maternal grandmother was much cleverer than my grandfather and must have found him a trial. But they made the best of it. Both couples had 7 children; 2 of my mother's siblings died in infancy.

My paternal grandfather started a hat factory in Aldersgate Street. The family was poor, and my father went to several schools before leaving at 14, but eventually the family became prosperous – everyone then wore hats – and my father's younger brothers were sent to University College School. But the factory foundered in the 1929 crash, and as the eldest son, my Uncle Wozzy, was a gambler, my father – the second son - was summoned back from America, where he was doing well, to save the family fortunes and keep his younger brothers in school. He hated having to make his living running a hat factory, but he was a very capable man, and clothes are always needed, so he made a go of it. But although the factory survived, my father nearly didn't – he got TB, for which there was then no cure, and had to spend a year in a sanatorium. (I was then three.) My mother had no idea how to run a business, and by the time he came out all the money was gone and he had to start all over again. His health was permanently broken, and he retired when I was 15, when we went from being rather well off to a life of money worries.

My mother's father had studied to be a rabbi, but he fled to avoid conscription into the Tsar's army, where he would have had to serve 21 years. He got to America but for some reason said he was a locksmith. The Ellis Island authorities gave him a lock to unpick; he couldn't; and was sent back to Europe. He ended up in Chester; later he moved to Dalston and worked in a sweatshop. My grandmother followed him, on foot, with her younger sister Clara and my Aunt Bessie, who was then 18 months old. My mother grew up in Dalston, not then a happening place; a billboard on her way to school urged her to Take Courage, which she did. Later my grandparents moved to a semi in Hendon. On their dining room wall was a picture of Lenin haranguing the masses, so I guess they were Bundists. Later, my mother taught my grandmother to read English from the New Statesman.

2. Childhood and Education

I grew up in Edgware, the last stop on the Northern Line. My parents bought the house there (a classic 1930s house, white stucco with green metal windows and a semicircular bay) partly because it was on the A5 which leads inter alia to Luton, where Dad's factory had moved during the war. It is also the home of the North London Collegiate School, where I was educated from the age of 7. I was an obstreperous and antisocial child – I got chucked out of both the Brownies *and* the Guides, and nearly got expelled from school before I'd even begun, for poking my tongue out at the first form teacher. The dislike was doubtless mutual. However, my mother prevailed upon the headmistress to let me stay, which I did till I was 18.



North London Collegiate School.

The NLCS was an intellectual hothouse. Every year the list of state scholarships and exhibitions to Oxbridge was read out at assembly. I didn't get one of those, nor did I get in to Oxford (I was first reserve for Somerville) but I did get in to Cambridge, where I read French and Spanish. I didn't want to do English, as I knew I'd read all that stuff anyway, and I'd had an excellent French teacher who became a lifelong friend. With hindsight, I should probably have done history; I've spent much of my life writing social history. But it was badly taught in our school – just lists of kings and treaties. I thought modern languages would let me get acquainted with other cultures, and my linguistic inclination is part of the reason that for the whole of our married life we've kept a house in Europe, first in Italy, later in France. In fact I've never felt very English, except in America.



I went to Girton (above), then an all-women college, and had a great time. I met my future husband, Phil Steadman, in my first week, at a party given by one of Girton's many Old North Londoners, and immediately went off with somebody else. I found my old first-year diary a while ago; I counted dates with 20 different boys in the first term. But after London, where I'd attended the London Schools Left Club in Soho, sung in a Jewish choir, gone on Aldermaston marches, and travelled several times to Madrid by myself, where I stayed with a terrifically Catholic family to improve my Spanish, the Cambridge 'men' all seemed very young and green. (And were: National Service had just been abolished, they'd come straight from school, mostly all-boys' public schools.)

My Girton friends were much more interesting, which isn't surprising as there were very few women's places at Cambridge and only 1 in 20 applicants got in. I suspect both the college and a lot of girls were poorer socially when it went co-ed, as after that all the brightest girls applied to the erstwhile men's colleges and only comparatively mediocre students would select Girton.

3. Broadcasting

I had no idea what I wanted to do after college. I wanted to write, but that's hardly an acceptable ambition. I was interested in Latin America, and could have done a PhD which would have taken me there. The Guardian offered to make me their Latin America stringer, but didn't offer me a trainee job; the BBC turned me down for a studio manager job. However, to everyone's astonishment, including my own, I got a far more glamorous BBC job, as a general trainee. They took 6 people every year, including one girl; that year, I was the girl.

General trainees were picked as potential leaders – Directors General, heads of department – and I can now see that all the chaps were deeply aware of this, and did indeed end up running the BBC and ITV, or becoming successful film directors. I, however, simply didn't think in those terms; girls, then, just weren't brought up to imagine they could be in charge. And as a result I didn't make the most of the opportunities. I ended up in TV Current Affairs, a very male and drunken department where women had to run twice as fast to stay in the same place, got fed up and moved to ITV, where I worked on live magazine programmes and became a nervous wreck. While I was there, however, I wrote a terrible novel called Yes Man's Land about life in TV, which got taken up by Muriel Box who had started a publishing house called Femina. It didn't get published, I forget why, but a colleague at Rediffusion who wrote detective stories introduced me to his agent. So I became officially a writer.

I left Rediffusion after a while, went freelance and lived hand to mouth. BBC Radio paid £7 for short pieces (for Woman's Hour or Today or Bush House, where all general trainees started out and where I had friends.) £7 paid my rent; a few of those a week and I could keep solvent. But my new agent got a couple of school book commissions for me, and I realised that this was the kind of life I wanted to lead. I had been earning £1750 p.a. at Rediffusion, which was then an excellent salary. If you could get a £1000 advance for a book and knock it off quickly, that was much more fun as well as being a sort of base salary.

I also did freelance TV researching and scripting and wrote articles and reviews for weeklies and dailies – the Times, the TLS, the Independent, the Listener, the New Statesman, New Society, New Scientist, the Evening Standard, a monthly called Nova ... I was offered jobs on New Society and the Evening Standard, but turned them down, which was probably very stupid. I often thought so, looking back later. But at the time, I had no hesitation. I hadn't liked being employed, and my father's example – by the time I got conscious of what was going on he was at the mercy of bank managers - had made me determined to live life on my own terms. They weren't very lucrative terms, but unlike men, who were expected to earn enough to keep a family going, women only had to provide for themselves.

4. Writing

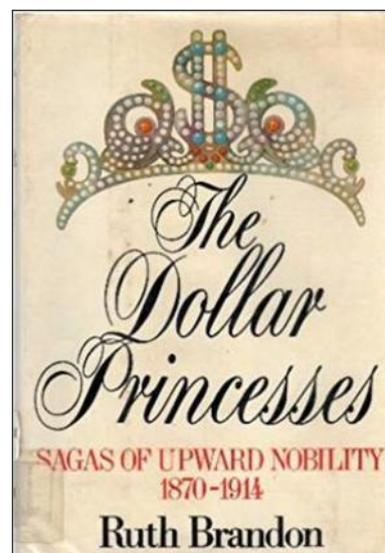
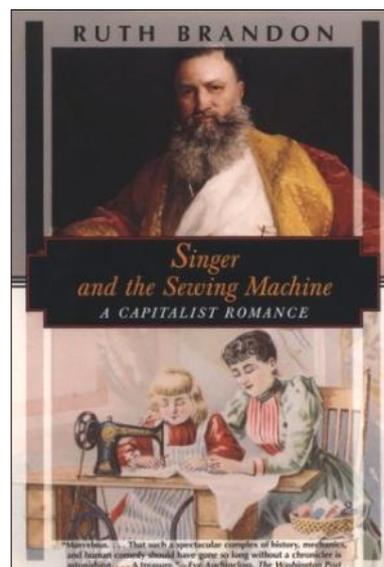
My first adult book was written with a friend, Christie Davies, who was at that time a producer for BBC Radio and became Professor of Jokes at Reading University. We spent three years collecting material from newspaper reports, trial transcripts, books, lawyers, the Home Office and - most important - interviews with the persons concerned, and analysed the existing system of justice, isolated and identified the areas in which the system was at fault, and the successive hazards which may confront the innocent man suspected of a criminal offence. Then we sat in my flat and argued while I typed.

Three years later I published my first solo book, 'Singer and the Sewing Machine: A Capitalist Romance.' I wanted to write about the immigrant experience, because that was my own background, but the challenge was to find an appropriate story.

I forget why I started reading about sewing machines, but when I read about Isaac Singer - 24 children, all acknowledged but only the first two and the last four legitimate, rags to riches, the start of mass production and hire purchase, a son who founded Palm Beach and was the father of Isadora Duncan's children, a daughter who became Princesse de Polignac and a famous musical Maecenas - I knew I had my story. My American agent put me up in his Park Avenue apartment, the Singer Company lent me an office on the 64th floor of the Rockefeller Center and off I went. It was fantastic fun, was a Book of the Month selection, and introduced me to the literary world.

After that I did a couple of books for George Weidenfeld. One was about the Dollar Princesses, the rich American girls whose grandfathers had crossed the Atlantic to make their fortunes and who now brought those fortunes back to Europe and became duchesses and princesses: a sort of continuation of the Singer story in the other direction. These were the girls Henry James and Edith Wharton wrote about, so it was an excuse to read a lot of novels.

The other book was called The Spiritualists (I wanted to call it The Machine in the Ghost, a much better title, but they wouldn't let me.) It was about one of my other great interests, the power of self-deception. I wanted to examine why so many eminent thinkers, and in particular scientists (William James, Sir William Crookes, Sir Oliver Lodge, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Alfred Russel Wallace ...), from the mid-19th century on, could let themselves be taken in by crass conjuring tricks, which I described in detail. I thought what I'd set out was unarguable, but believers were scandalised.



Parapsychology was and remains an example of intellect's powerlessness in the face of gut belief.

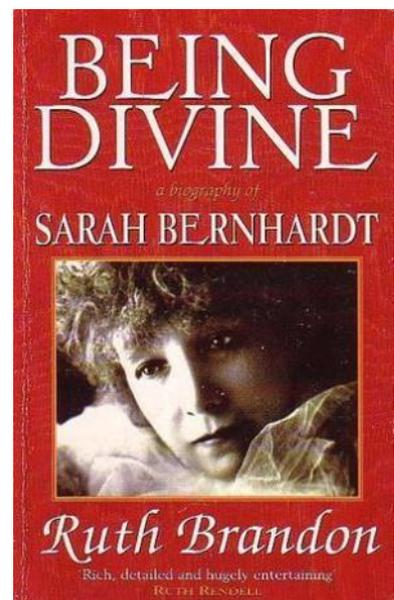
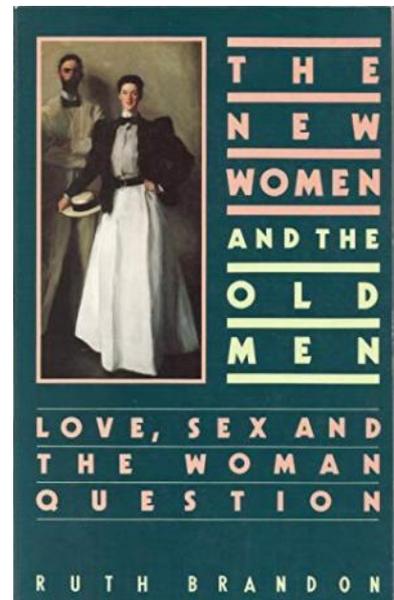
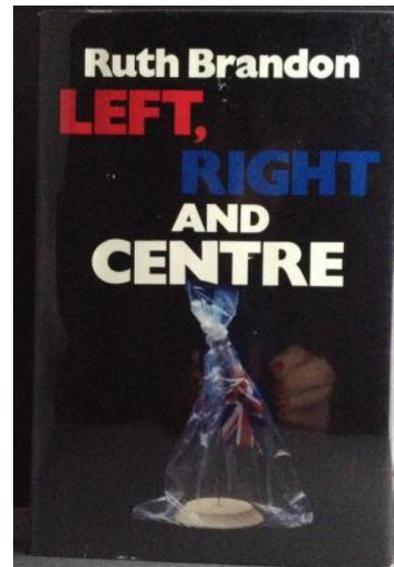
I did the edit of *The Spiritualists* on the phone the day before my daughter was induced. One of the penalties of having a baby was that it wasn't possible to get out and do research. So I decided to try writing a detective story. 'Left, Right and Centre' was written during my daughter's morning and afternoon naps (fortunately for me, she was a wonderfully sleepy baby). It featured the anti-nuclear movement, with which both I and my husband were then much involved, and was published by Collins Crime Club. For the next few years I alternated fiction and non-fiction.

When my daughter began at nursery, and I had mornings to myself, I began another book about self-deception. 'The New Women and the Old Men' was about the early socialists – Havelock Ellis, Eleanor Marx, Olive Schreiner, H.G.Wells, Bernard Shaw, E.Nesbit, the Webbs – and their various relationships and entanglements, using their copious diaries and letters. What interested me was the way the sense that they were helping the chaps pioneer a new and superior way of life persuaded these brilliant women that they were being modern when in fact the chaps, also in the name of principle, were using them in the most old-fashioned possible way.

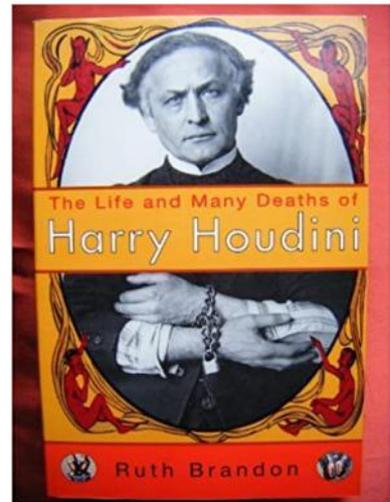
I then wrote another detective story, *Out of Body, Out of Mind*, about spiritualism. My husband is an academic, and this was the first of my novels to feature East Midlands University, or EMU. The corpse was based on a Cambridge friend I hadn't seen for twenty years, who was and is an enthusiast for parapsychology. But then, unexpectedly, we met. It was very embarrassing.

After that I wrote the sole straight biography of my career, about Sarah Bernhardt. I wanted to write a book about what it means to be modern – how Bernhardt wasn't, while Colette was, and why this was so – but my editor poo-pooed this. It's the only book I have ever been bored writing – what was the point of doing yet another Bernhardt biography? - and its only really live chapter is the one about why Duse was modern and Bernhardt wasn't. It was also an opportunity to analyse charisma, which was interesting.

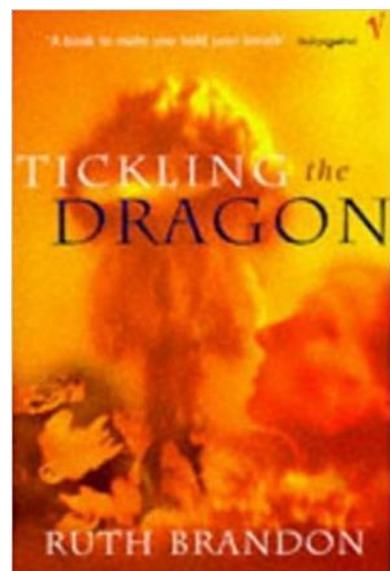
My next book, *The Life and Many Deaths of Harry*



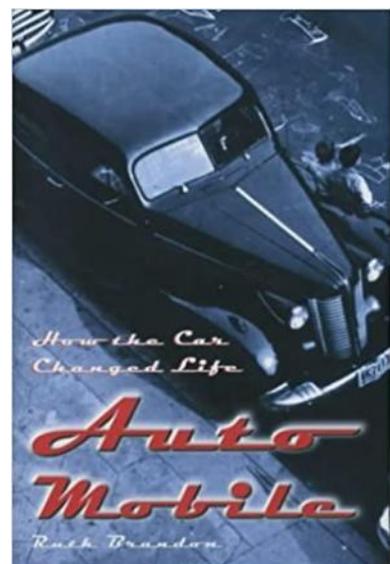
Houdini, was also a study of charisma. Houdini was one of the people featured in *The Spiritualists* - his encounter with Conan Doyle became notorious - and his whole career was of course based on a powerful mix of deception and self-deception. But the book's construction presented challenges. How to satisfy people's desire to know how the tricks work without the bathos and anticlimax of *How Tricks Work* books? I decided to use the tricks as metaphor, a trick, described and explained, to introduce each chapter (e.g. *The Vanishing Woman* prefaced a chapter on Houdini's mother's death.) What most seemed to interest the many people who interviewed me about this book was my assumption that Houdini was probably impotent and that much of his act was designed to prove, to the world and to himself, that he was a great he-man who loved romancing the ladies. (In fact I suspect he was a repressed homosexual.) I met lots of magicians, and magic historians, who were fascinating. A friend made an Omnibus film based on it for the BBC. And it earned me my first six-figure advance.



Since I now had some financial latitude, my agent suggested I try a proper novel. 'Tickling the Dragon' was about the bomb and the way it dominated the lives of my generation. I got a good advance for it, and my editor loved it, but it didn't sell many. I did another novel for him, 'The Uncertainty Principle', about the parallel-universes theory and physics as a modern-day religion, but that also failed to sell. So



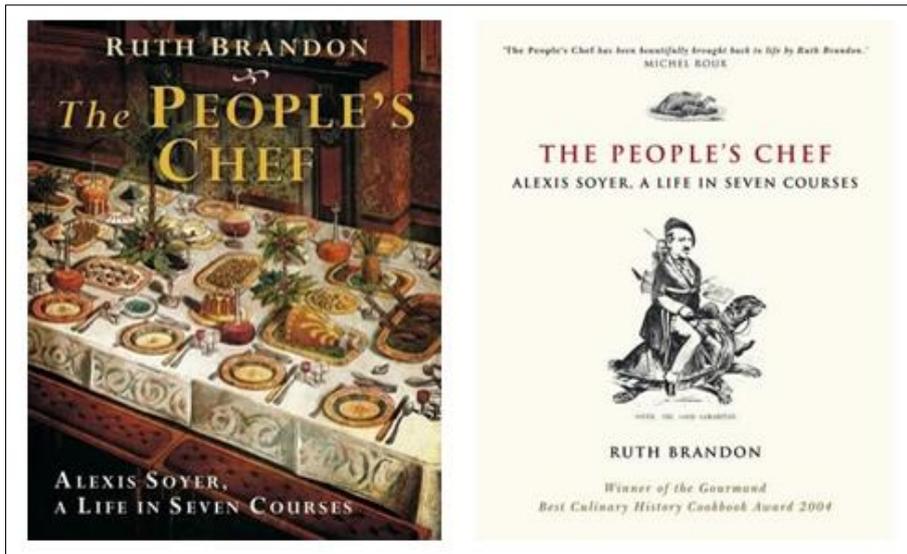
I returned to non-fiction. *Surreal Lives* was about surrealism not as art history but as a political movement based on whatever happened, at any one time, to be obsessing its brilliant and compelling founder, André Breton. Born in reaction to the world that had allowed World War 1 to happen, it faded away after WW2. It both reflected French politics between the wars and gave rise to a new way of seeing the world. My own view is that far the greatest surrealist artist was the film director Luis Buñuel, and among other things I wanted to look at the way both he and Salvador Dali were products of Spanish Catholicism – Surrealism being about as far as you could get from that particular brand of primitive religion.



I then decided to do a book quite different from any of the others. 'Auto Mobile – How the Car Changed Life' isn't about cars as such, but is about psychology,

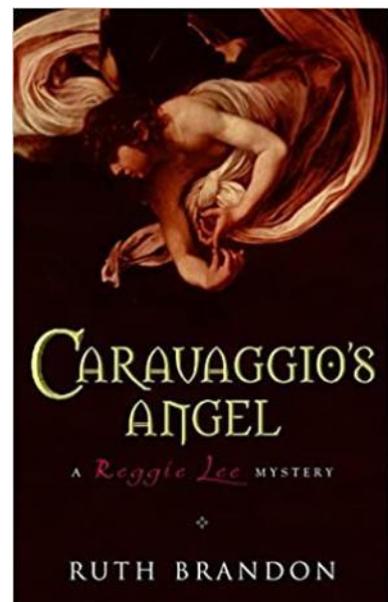
Fordism, town planning, design, and all the other things that have contributed to make our world one in which it's hard to live without a car. It received the most polarised reviews of any book I've written. Some people really loved it, but others – in particular male petrolheads – detested it. They particularly hated its jokes. It came out just after 9/11 and sank without trace, though it did get me a job – for the next few years I wrote a column for the Independent's motoring page. I like it a lot.

In the meantime I'd written a couple more detective stories, 'Mind Out' and 'The Gorgon's Smile'. Mind Out was about memory transplants – I'd made a bet with myself that however ridiculous the plot it would get published. And The Gorgon's Smile was about the part of Italy where we had our house.



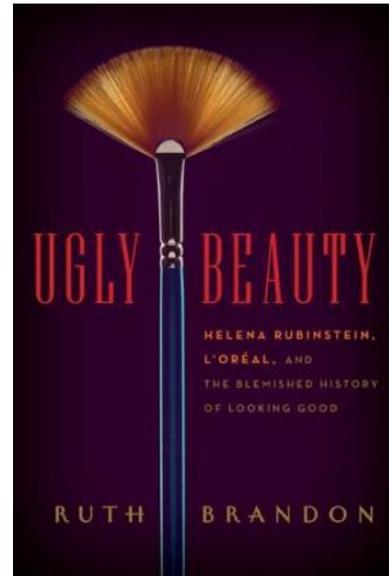
I've always been a keen cook, and my book about the chef Alexis Soyer was called – and was – A Life in Seven Courses. For each of the chapters, from his birth in post-revolutionary France to his death in mid-century England, I cooked one of his recipes and related that to the particular circumstances of his life. It's largely, as his life was, about social class. It didn't do very well, but it's perhaps the favourite of my books. And it fulfilled its function: I needed to get back onstage after the Auto Mobile debacle.

At the publication party for Soyer, which was held, appropriately, in the Reform Club where he worked, someone suggested I write a book about governesses. My agent thought this was a great idea, so I did it. It's about how governesses were a way to ensure women remained uneducated, and it ended with the foundation of Girton College, where women could receive a proper education and governesses could be made redundant. But my heart was never really in it. Subjects suggested by other people never really worked for me. I then wrote another detective story, 'Caravaggio's Angel', about the art world and the part of France where we have our house. It was supposed to be the first of a series, but I couldn't think of any



more stories of that sort.

My most recent book is about the beauty business. 'Ugly Beauty' tells the stories of Helena Rubinstein and Eugene Schueller, the founder of l'Oreal, and how they scandalously intertwined. It's a very political book, both because cosmetics have always been markers in the fight for female emancipation and because Schueller got mixed up with the French far right before and during the war, with scandalous repercussions into the 1980s. It's also the sad story of Schueller's daughter, an intelligent but uneducated woman never allowed to play a proper part in the life of the business that made her rich. It is a really terrific and most unexpected story, and earned another six-figure advance.



The contract for 'Ugly Beauty' was signed just before the 2008 financial crash. I told myself I'd just got in under the wire – and so it proved. I haven't published anything since. Could you do it today? I doubt it. I wrote my books at a time when the decisions at publishing houses were made by editors, and where the profits made by best-sellers allowed people like me to make a modest living in which I didn't have to rely on teaching to stay solvent. Now they are conglomerates run by accountants, while the internet has turned the whole publishing business on its head and authors have become mere content-providers. Now anyone can publish a book. But few can make a living doing so.

5. Book List

Fiction

Caravaggio's Angel
The Uncertainty Principle
Tickling the Dragon
Mind Out
The Gorgon's Smile
Out of Body, Out of Mind
Left, Right and Centre

Non Fiction

Ugly Beauty: Helena Rubinstein, L'Oreal and the Blemished History of Looking Good
Other People's Daughters: The Life And Times Of The Governess
People's Chef: Alexis Soyer, a Life in Seven Courses
Automobile: How the Car Changed Life
Surreal Lives: The Surrealists 1917-1945
The Life and Many Deaths of Harry Houdini
Being Divine: Biography of Sarah Bernhardt
The New Women and the Old Men: Love, Sex and the Woman Question
The Burning Question: The Anti-nuclear Movement Since 1945
Spiritualists: Passion for the Occult in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries
The Dollar Princesses
Singer and the Sewing Machine: A Capitalist Romance
