

'My abortion:

Anne Robinson was among the first women to have an abortion legally in the UK. She tells Helen Rumbelow why the law needs to be modernised now

On the face of it, she is one of the last people you would choose to host a show about abortion. You could think, I say to her: "We've got Anne Robinson from *The Weakest Link* with a group of women who have had abortions. She's going to terrify them and make them cry." She replies quietly. "That's why this was the real me."

She does not terrify the women. Instead she tells them, for the first time on screen, about her own abortion. She tells them how scared she was, how ashamed. As she talks I can see each woman refocusing her eyes from the TV Robinson, all acid tongue and dominatrix leather, to the real, human Anne.

It is the same for me. I arrive at her Kensington home (she is worth an estimated £50 million, much of it in property in London, New York and the Cotswolds). A housekeeper answers the door. I hover in the formal drawing room, which is brimming with political books and expensive candles, waiting for a summons from the red-helmeted interrogator-in-chief.

Robinson appears and asks if we can go into the kitchen. Her dog is old and ill, and needs company on the sofa, by the fire. So I sit next to the dog and in many ways get the same treatment. Robinson is tender and solicitous, tells me to "sit soft, as they say in the north", but is strict with us when it's for our own good. She points a finger at the dog, saying: "You farted and now she is going to think it is me." I don't — I wouldn't dare — but then we can hardly get on for her wanting to know about what's going on in my life and offering juicy, swearsy advice.

This, at 73, is her new mission: helping her daughter's generation of women. And to do that she is finally dropping her guard, showing her entire self as you have never seen it before. A woman who clawed her way to the top of a tough newspaper industry in the 1970s, taking on collateral damage. There was the bad marriage to Charles Wilson, her boss; losing residency of her daughter.

Emma; alcoholism; and depression. A woman who had her abortion almost exactly as the 1967 Abortion Act came into effect in 1968, then closed off that pain so she could immediately report on abortion politics for *The Sunday Times*, even witnessing one. You became battle-hardened, didn't you?

"Yeah," she says, "but that's quite a good place to teach from, isn't it? I mean, it's possible. It's all possible. If I could have an hour singularly with each of you, I could pass this on."

I go from thinking that she is the last person you would want to host the BBC's flagship programme to mark half a century since abortion was decriminalised to thinking she is the only person who should.

"I just want women to feel," she says, emphasising every word, "they can do whatever they want."

Abortion on Trial feels radical right from the premise: women talking about their abortions. "It's never done on TV," Robinson says, despite one in three women in the UK having had one. So Robinson insisted on two conditions of intimacy: she would host the eight women at her Cotswolds home for the weekend, and she would share her story.

"At the beginning of 1968 I was newly married, very unhappy, and found I was pregnant," she tells the women. "I was terrified, confused, very lonely. I didn't think I could talk to anyone... The only way I could go ahead with [an] abortion was if I didn't think about it. Like someone jumping from a cliff."

She was 23, and a "black doom" enveloped her, she tells the group, but she could not tell her mother nor her friends because "I was so ashamed... I have not allowed myself to regret it... That's a conscious decision."

Robinson mentions this in her autobiography, *Memoirs of an Unfit Mother*, going on to write in the book that she initially made plans for a second abortion when she became pregnant with Emma, but then decided to have the baby. She covers this briefly, in a matter of paragraphs.

“I don't think women should be miscarrying in a loo in 2017

Her home is stacked with photos of her daughter and grandchildren.

"I was still doing in the book what I did when I had it," she says, miming blinkers. "Get this over with. Of course you're alone when you have an abortion. It doesn't matter who's walking there with you, does it? You're alone."

She is still unflinching. When a pro-life woman on the show says the group have killed their babies, Robinson looks around and says: "Eight murderers: how do we feel about that?" Why put herself through this now? "That seemed to me the very least I could do, otherwise I'm just another cheesy presenter, aren't I? Women don't talk about it. You know, it's going to shock Emma."

Why? Your daughter knew you had an abortion? "She did. But funnily enough she's never read my autobiography. We only discussed it last year and she said, 'Really?' and I said, 'Yeah, it was at a tough time.' But I can see that if I was where she is now... Once you're in a really good marriage [and] you've got children you love I think the idea is quite shocking. Except if you're a woman in a corner