

Graduate of the

Bel Mooney rose from humble beginnings to become a top author, surviving a succession of traumas along the way

AUTHOR Bel Mooney would be delighted if her 17-year-old daughter Kitty married Swampy, the eco-warrior who defied security recently to tunnel in protest at the proposed new runway for Manchester Airport.

"He looks a poppet and seems so brave and intelligent," says Bel, adding that even her husband Jonathan Dimpleby, the broadcaster who asked Prince Charles that question, would approve.

It is Bel, you may recall, who in 1994 suddenly realised with horror that, yes, that was Kitty on the television news, with her arms linked with a dreadlocked eco warrior being moved on by security. Her daughter, it seemed, had joined the New Age travellers protesting against a bypass to be built near their Avon home.

Then three days later Bel had a volte-face and left the comfort of their five bedroom house to join the undemocratic mob.

For a week, chilly, exhausted and grubby, she slept in a sleeping bag in a tent.

"The experience was life-changing," she says. "It made

me care in a much more visceral way about country matters. If I hadn't been involved, I wouldn't have moved to our farm and be living the life I live now."

This month she's publishing *Joining The Rainbow*, a children's book inspired by Kitty's road protest, with the heroine based on her daughter.

We meet in "Jonathan's office", their large West London house with dreary furniture and super contemporary paintings.

Bel is wearing leather trousers in 70 degree heat, apparently because her other clothes are at the farm. She has a lovely, almost luminescent, face which shows her emotions and she talks animatedly with a slight Northern accent and lisp. It's easy to imagine her being flirty and girly.

Five of her books are being published this year; in July the

BBC is broadcasting the *Last Governor* — a series on Hong Kong made by Bel and Jonathan's production company, Dimpleby Partners; and her award winning series, *Devout Sceptics*, returns to Radio 4.

November sees the publication of *Intimate Letters*, her novel about a woman who discovers her husband's infidelity after his death. "She finds his love letters filed under 'Admin' in his computer." Is Bel being prescient? "No," she laughs.

WHAT'S it like being part of the Dimpleby Clan, a description I'm told she'll dislike? "It's fine," she demurs. "I call myself Mrs Dimpleby other than professionally."

"I revered their father (Richard, the broadcaster cum

national institution) and it was daunting to marry into this family. But I'm inordinately proud of Jonathan." How has life been different since the Prince Charles interview? "It was difficult at the time because of the Press interest. But Jonathan says that asking that question lanced a boil," she replies.

"Our relationship with the Prince is cordial now. He and Jonathan still talk on the phone." Why? "That's private."

Bel's prodigious output has its roots in her working class Liverpool childhood. Her self-educated father was a manager in the Ministry of Defence and her mother was a typist.

"My parents preferred the phrase 'ordinary' to 'working class'. I came from a background where you worked incredibly hard and studied in order to escape."

"When I met Jonathan, I called everything by the wrong name. I had 'breakfast, dinner and tea'. It's embarrassing to get those things wrong."

"Even now when I'm mixing with smart people there's an occasional voice inside me that says, 'help'. You never quite shake off that feeling that they're going to rumble you."

"I also felt like an ugly duckling at grammar school. I was



WARM FRONT: Bel admits her jovial manner belies an obsession with the darker aspects of life

THE EXPRESS: SATURDAY JUNE 7 1997

WEEKEND

43

school of hard knocks



The Caroline Phillips Interview

a studious, swotty, lonely girl with thick glasses. I didn't have many friends.

"When other girls were into boys, I was reading books and writing poetry. I've always felt driven to prove myself because I was a four-eyed Beryl from Liverpool." Bel grew up in the Sixties. "But I didn't do any drugs apart from the odd joint. I'm more of a boozier. I can put away a bottle of wine and not even notice it."

Sexually it was also a free time, although she didn't have her first boyfriend until she was 15 years old. "Then I had a steady boyfriend and a few one night stands as well. I wasn't promiscuous but I wasn't virginal either."

When she was 17, her brother William broke his back in a car accident. "We thought he was going to be totally paralysed," says Bel. "Every Sunday we'd drive from Bath to the spinal injuries unit in Cardiff. He ended up in a wheelchair."

IN A poignant way, this trauma prepared her, if only a little, for the forthcoming horrors of motherhood. Her first born, Daniel, was put into special care for a month. "He was jaundiced and under-

weight," she explains. "I have a placental insufficiency and don't make good babies."

"Isn't that phraseology interesting? It's as if it's my fault." (Now 23, Daniel is a chef and about to marry Clare Simmons, niece of the cartoonist Posh.) Then came Tom, who was stillborn after 15 hours of labour. "It makes me cry, I can't bear it," she says, bursting into tears. After he was born, she still didn't know he'd died.

"They filled me with drugs and told Jonathan to come back and tell me later. He went home alone and rang his brother David who came round with a bottle of whisky at two in the morning."

"I wasn't supposed to wake up until he returned. But I awoke at five in the morning. I rang the bell and the nurse came in and told me the baby was dead."

Tears pour down her cheeks. "My obsession with death began then. I had given birth to death, which is a contradiction in terms. Since then I've been trying to come to terms with it by writing about bereavement. On November 26 I thought, 'Oh God, we could have had Tom's 21st birthday.' That's what women who lose babies

do. You always remember dates."

For her next pregnancy, Bel was bedridden for three months. Then Kitty was born with a rare bowel disorder, club foot and spine defects. They also thought she might be a hunchback.

"It was better than having a dead baby," says Bel, who now dotes on her daughter. Did it ever cross their minds to have her adopted? "Heavens, no."

Had they known about Kitty's disabilities when Bel was pregnant, would she have gone ahead with the pregnancy? "Probably," she pauses. "I think so. Kitty asked me that last year, actually. I'd say definitely."

KITTY, who is now repeating her year at school because she has missed so much, has spent her life going in and out of hospital. She has had 26 general anaesthetics in the last year alone and has been in hospital innumerable times.

"We often live in fear that she'll die. Last August she had a life-threatening operation. I spent the month before driving around with a black cloud following my car, crying continually."

Has anything been good about the experience? "Such traumas often drive families apart, but the reverse is true in our case. Also, spending so much time in hospitals is enlarging and humbling. You can't think you're some great media star. You realise you're the same as everybody else."

After Kitty's birth, Bel miscarried at eight weeks and



CALL ME MRS DIMBLEBY: Bel with her husband, broadcaster Jonathan, and their children

was then sterilised. "I felt quite liberated afterwards."

Bel's own relationship with her parents (whom she still speaks about, girlishly, as Mummy and Daddy) is close. Until two years ago, her parents lived with them.

"Now they want their own front door." It seems she was a terribly good daughter, never broke away, never rebelled. She paints her relationship with Jonathan as solid, as well. He proposed to

her after a week, in the Wimpy bar in London's Oxford Street. "I'd think my kids were off their trolleys if they did that."

Early on they were competitive, she felt in his shadow and he travelled frequently, leaving her lonely.

"There were bad times, which are not for public consumption."

Now she says they're extremely good friends. "I'd rather talk to him than any-

one else." Does she never get bored of him? "No, just frustrated. We're very different. I'm more of a party person."

"I believe you have to work at marriage, but Jonathan thinks it's just a matter of luck."

"It has been difficult, a huge test of character having to put yourself second all the time."

Bel also has an obsession with loss and the darker side of life. Is her jolliness a front? "Yes, a lot of the time."