Lynn Neary’s cubicle at National Public Radio is a book lover’s dream. Stacks of hardcovers and paperbacks line the shelves and threaten to consume an entire corner of her already teeming desk: Paul Auster, Joyce Maynard, Peter Carey, Simon Winchester’s biography of the Atlantic Ocean. Some are books she’s preparing to feature in a piece on the radio; others have already had their moment; and still others she absolutely intends to read, eventually, one of these days.

nameplate reading “Cultural Angel,” a reference to a piece she once did on the play Angels in America, is mounted above her keyboard, near the window. The space is surprisingly small for one of NPR’s signature voices, but a look around reveals a certain equality in the newsroom: everywhere people are squeezed into tiny spaces. Neary, dressed in black but with an open face and eyes lit with curiosity, lobs a comment to the music reporter on the other side of her cubicle wall before settling into her chair, ready to begin the day.

Three years ago, Neary, TMC ’71, took the books and publishing beat at NPR after occupying, since 1982, seemingly every other on-air position public radio has to offer: newscaster for Morning Edition, host of Weekend All Things Considered, religion reporter for the culture desk. She has interviewed Mayan weavers in the hidden interior of Mexico and heard David Byrne’s rough demo of the Talking Heads’ smash hit “Burning Down the House.”

“It instantly made sense to me,” she says of the transition to her current assignment. “It’s a really old-fashioned business, and I’m really old fashioned.” She paused a beat, a comedian delivering a punch line. “Now it’s completely changing.”

Neary, who has never been a business reporter, finds herself on the cutting edge of the e-book revolution, writing as much about author Ann Patchett’s literary salon in Nashville as she does about the profit margin of electronic readers. It is both exhilarating and challenging. “I try to bring a writer’s eye and a feature reporter’s sensibility” to the task, she says.

And that may well sum up her career, which didn’t begin in journalism at all, but rather in social work, with a job at a psychiatric hospital. She also acted and waited tables.
“She is just amazingly confident and self-possessed behind a microphone, whether hosting a program or recording a piece,” says Laura Bertran, supervising editor for the NPR arts desk.

(more the latter than the former), before landing a job covering local news at a radio station in Rocky Mount, North Carolina. “I knew immediately I had found the right thing to do,” she recalls of her first on-air gig. “I thought, ‘Oh my god, I found it.’”

North Carolina was a long way for a Westchester County girl to go to find herself. Neary spent the first two years of her university career at Marymount College in Tarrytown, N.Y., before transferring into Fordham’s then all-female Thomas More College.

It was the late 1960s, and the world was splitting open, with Vietnam protests seizing campuses and gripping the nation. Neary wanted to be a part of it. “I wanted a bigger world than I felt like I had [in Tarrytown],” she says. An English major, then a political science major before switching back to English, Neary knew the career expectations at the time for women generally, and in her family in particular, covered a fairly small spectrum: teacher, nurse, secretary. Her acting experience tipped her off that she had a knack for performance, though, and her desire to do something socially significant led her to a course in radio journalism. The rest, as they say, is history.

He spent a year in Rocky Mount, covering Kiwanis meetings, the police and the chamber of commerce, interviewing people on the street, learning the radio news business from soup to nuts. “It was a very good experience,” she says, “going to another part of the country, seeing how other people live.”

A woman in local government suggested that Neary look into public radio. Two years at WOSU in Columbus, Ohio, followed, with Neary covering education, but taking it “a little beyond traditional education reporting,” she says. At the time, American hostages were being held in Iran, and President Carter was reinstating registration for Selective Service. Neary interviewed students on campus about the military, then went to a swearing-in ceremony for people who had just joined the service. She called NPR to tell them about the tape, some of which they used on air.

“It was one of those things,” she says, “where I happened to be ahead of the news for once in my life.” After that, NPR started calling her periodically, asking for contributions. It was only a matter of time before they came calling with a regular job. Two years as a newscaster on Morning Edition followed, then eight years as the host of Weekend All Things Considered before that led to the religion beat on the newly formed culture desk.

Neary had a tremendous curiosity about what she calls “the religious landscape” of the country at the time. The religious right was ascendant, and welfare reform was being pushed through Congress; politics and religion were intersecting in new and explosive ways, and she had her finger on the pulse. She even did a four-part piece in 1993 and 1994 on Islam in America, once again ahead of the news tide.

“She is just amazingly confident and self-possessed behind a microphone, whether hosting a program or recording a piece,” says Laura Bertran, supervising editor for the NPR arts desk and Neary’s immediate boss. “She has mastered how to talk to an audience.”

Part of that mastery has to do with Neary’s own enthusiasm for her topics, a curiosity Neary describes as part anthropological and part journalistic.

The books and publishing beat suits Neary’s home life in Washington, D.C., which includes her husband David Hall, a retired cameraman for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, and her 14-year-old daughter, Maya. She could never have raised a child getting up at 2 a.m. every day to work on Morning Edition, and the weekend hours of All Things Considered began to wear on her after a while, as well. Still, those were extremely fruitful years, leading to a Robert F. Kennedy Journalism Award, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting Gold Award, and an Association of Women in Radio and Television Award, among others.

“I’ve really been a generalist. I have a curiosity and an openness to ideas and different kinds of people, and to walking into situations a lot of people might not want to go into,” she says. “I’m in a pretty happy place. I don’t know what’s next but I think I could do this for a while.”

—Julie Bourbon is a Washington, D.C.-based writer and a frequent contributor to this magazine.