

Funny Women: An Interview With Humorist Annabelle Gurwitch

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A few weeks ago, I was thrilled to meet and interview humorist [Annabelle Gurwitch](#). She and I sat down in the lobby of the downtown boutique hotel where she was staying, and laughed our way through a conversation about her work, comedy and women in Hollywood. Annabelle was in NYC to promote her new book, [So I See You Made An Effort: Compliments, indignities and survival stories from the edge of 50](#) (Blue Rider Press). A *New York Times* Bestseller, the book is a very funny non-memoir collection of essays about getting older. Gurwitch has been a comedic actor for many years and is best known as the original hostess of TBS's [Dinner and a Movie](#). She has appeared in numerous television programs as an actor including [Murphy Brown](#), [Dexter](#), [Seinfeld](#) and [Boston Legal](#). She also frequently gives her opinion on such shows as [The Today Show](#), [Real Time with Bill Maher](#), [The Early Show](#), the [Today Show](#), [CBS Early Show](#), [Queen Latifah](#), the [Dr. Oz Show](#), [MSNBC](#) and [CNN](#), and has been invited to share her thoughts on many others: [The Oprah Winfrey Show](#), and [The Wanda Sykes Show](#), to name a few. Annabelle is currently adapting her book for the F/X television network.

Liza: When did you know you were funny?

Annabelle: I still wonder about this every day. I fell into comedy completely by accident. I started out in experimental theater; there's nothing funny about experimental theater. I did a lot of German expressionist plays—want to talk about not funny! I took myself very seriously. In my late 20s I came to Los Angeles and started getting acting work in these comedic roles on television. And I got this role on *Murphy Brown* as one of her secretaries that got fired.



Liza: How great!

Annabelle: Everyone in the business was watching that show and I got swamped with auditions for comedy shows. People thought I was funny. Then I got this series, [Not Necessarily The News](#), which was my first comedy series and I began to meet everyone in the comedy world. I helped [Julia Louis-Dreyfus](#) find an apartment when she was cast in SNL. A lot of people were coming up at that time—[Kathy Griffin](#)—I met [Janeane Garofalo](#) because my husband was one of the creators of the [Ben Stiller](#) show. I met all these people at that time—[Judy Gold](#), [Anne Meara](#), [Sarah Silverman](#) to name a few. But funny, I still wonder about that.

Liza: You were not a funny kid?

Annabelle: Not a funny kid. I was really serious, never the class clown, very dramatic. At a literary festival a few weeks ago, there were a bunch of novelists who wrote humorous novels, and they said, “we’re not trying to be funny, we’re not trying to be funny.” Well, I’m trying to be funny. I’m also very interested in the line between comedy and tragedy. I try to walk that line, really, to have both.

Liza: I definitely can see it in your work.

Annabelle: It really interests me. I recently read a one star review of my book, and the reviewer said, “She’s not David Sedaris.” Well, I’m not [David Sedaris](#). There is one David Sedaris! I’m interested in comedy/tragedy. Which is it? I always find myself laughing inappropriately. At a very serious play I attended recently, the actors came on stage and they were barefoot. It just struck me as so funny, I began to laugh so much I was asked to leave.

Liza: You work in so many different fields. You are in publishing, theater, TV. Is there one you prefer over the other?

Annabelle: Oh, it’s so hard. I really love writing. I get tremendous satisfaction from writing. But I also love talking. I like to have the combination of the two. In the ideal world, I get to do both. I’m not a “joke writer,” I don’t tell “jokes.” I like stories, and I like combining things to be funny, and there are some that work in print and some that work out loud.

Liza: Some would say that storytelling is more of a female form of humor. Do you agree?

Annabelle: I don’t know if that’s true. [Paula Poundstone](#), [Wendy Liebman](#): joke, joke, joke. I don’t know that I’m good at the joke. I was briefly on [Seinfeld](#) and the writers there were amazing. Creator [Larry David](#) is a joke teller and a storyteller.

Liza: Your book is spot on and a lot of fun to read. When you write about becoming invisible in your forties and fifties, what do you mean?

Annabelle: First of all, its not limited to women. When I was on [CBS This Morning with Charlie Rose](#) recently, during a break, Charlie said to me, “Its not only women who feel invisible. Mike Nichols said to me once, ‘Charlie, there will come a day when women don’t stop and want to go on a date with you, they are stopping to ask for directions.’”

There’s the random invisibility and then there’s the cultural invisibility. The simple on-the-street invisibility where you, by virtue of your age, have passed to a different kind of random encounter with strangers, for better or for worse. People aren’t looking at me the same way on the street. And you notice that. You know it’s a passage we go through in life. A friend of mine said it this way: “People are starting to offer me their seats on the subway. *Women* are offering their seats!” We both went “OOOOHHHH.”

The other day I was parking my car and I was resting my hand on the parking meter and a woman stopped and said, “Are you okay?” Do I look that terrible? I was visible, but in a different way. Then there are the in Nielson ratings, in television, which don’t go past age 49. Top viewership to them is maybe 18-49. You’re completely invisible. Then on top of that, when the networks put out what they are looking for, it’s 30’s and early 40’s. I hate to tell them, but a lot of the people watching TV are a lot older. And you don’t see these women depicted. There’s all kinds of invisibility on all

levels.

Liza: As an actress, do you feel invisibility there?

Annabelle: Of course. It's hard enough for women. My book was not couched as a memoir because I didn't want my readers to think it was a story of me, how I became a "veteran" actress.

In my business, women are still underrepresented, despite some of the success of some shows. There is a real dearth of roles, it drops off. There are more men employed at that age. Also, they get to play expositional roles. I aspire to expositional roles, I would like to be "Fighterman 37" saying, Mr. President, we are under attack. I aspire to craggy.

Liza: In your book, you talk about the economics of aging.

Annabelle: This is one of these things that is very well known. One of the most funny peculiar things about aging is we are looking at aging population that is not prepared to live that long. We're at the start of this, it wasn't the plan! We are going to be facing a lot of potential tough times for some people. We are not prepared. Luckily, humor is still free; although, not true, you've got to buy cable. Buy my book, it's cheaper! Humor is still cheaper than long-term care.

Liza: Also in your book, you hint at female competition, hating women who look better than you do, etc. You say that as we age, it seems to become a regular pastime.

Annabelle: I am making fun of myself when I say that. As a younger woman, I tried to lessen comparing myself to other people, particularly with other women. I totally did it and it wasn't fun. Of all the things in my life, *that* got me nowhere! So I'm making fun of myself. There's a story I tell in the book about how one of my friendships is based on my looking better than my friend, until she got plastic surgery and it was so good that now she looks better than me. It's a joke. I don't care about these things—but it's a joke based on reality for some.

I got off that hamster wheel. That's an issue of aging that I try to address in my book: the futility of the march to try to look better. I don't really think it's competitive with each other. I think people are competing with the ghost of their former beauty. I have complete compassion for that. It's something we all wrestle with. One day I will be looking in my mirror and I think, "What's Grandma Moses doing in my mirror?"

By the way, I now realize how beautiful everyone is when they are young. Just pure youth is beautiful. And when it's gone, it's fine to mourn its loss. I try to embrace the new version of myself, until I get a glance of myself in a mirror and think, "Is that what I look like now?" It's weird.

This is a product of our culture where we aren't in contact with multiple generations. So the youth have forgotten how people age because we live in tribes of our own age, so it's startling. I suppose if we lived in a multi-generational society, we wouldn't be so shocked.

I talk about the zero sum game of anti aging creams, etc. Eventually, you look older, or, you look older and you've had some work done. There's no getting around it. You never look younger or like your younger self. You might look a little less saggy, but you don't look like your older self. You have to make some peace with yourself.

I was writing this story for the *New York Times* where I tried to get samples of the most expensive things on the market. You'd think I was trying to break into a bank! I got a thimble full, and they had to have an armed guard there. I haven't used it yet, I just keep staring at it. Armani has one out called "Platinum"—they also have Double Platinum, Silver, Gold—and it was so expensive, my face aged while I was putting it on and she told me the price.

The people who work at these cosmetic counters, they must all have been English majors, they come up with the most fantastic words: restorative, repairing. Just reading the descriptions is sort of a vacation! Who thinks of these things?

I like comedy that has some value to it. I had not idea that the word “Cosmaceuticle,” a combo word of cosmetic and pharmaceutical, is not recognized by the FDA. It’s the silliest thing ever. And the people who sell these things are wearing WHITE Coats!

Liza: I like to ask this of all my interviewees from the world of humor, which is, why has it been so hard for women to be in the humor business? And is it changing?

Annabelle: Yes, it is changing. There are more women who are breakout stars, the next generation is so fantastic. Amazing people. When I was younger, you couldn’t name many....I grew up watching Laraine Newman on SNL! My parents used to take me to see [Joan Rivers](#). Now you can name a million people—writers and performers.

Liza: What’s different now than 30 years ago?

Annabelle: The most likely reason is the changing role of women in our society. Women are making different choices. As we’ve seen women change their roles in society, there has been more room for women in directing, in comedy. It’s a great time.

Still, in terms of employment, it’s less. There are more guys than women out there. I don’t think anyone who says, “Are women funny” is taken seriously anymore. I think it was [Tina Fey](#) that blew that away. Tina Fey single handedly, through her excellence, put that to rest. She was the first female head writer for SNL. Not only was she good, she was the best. Then her TV show *30 Rock*, movies, she’s got it all. And her book is funny! She’s fantastic.

Liza: We have to get the gate keepers at the top to hire more women.

Annabelle: Right, well that’s still is out there. And is being seen. Things are changing. Of course nothing ever changes fast enough.

[Amy Schumer](#) has just blown up, she’s killing it. When you think about how stand-ups start, you could argue that spending all that time on the road as a training ground, and comedians putting themselves out there repeatedly, and sucking. Maybe women didn’t want to do that or couldn’t do that; now they do. And there are so many avenues to get your work out there. I think that if women want to go on the road now they can, there’s not stigma anymore. Well, maybe they didn’t book women.

[Rosanne Barr](#) of course, she’s one of a kind, she broke down barriers, and [Whoopi Goldberg](#) as well. But Tina Fey was not only funny, she was a boss. There was nothing controversial about her, like Rosanne. I love Rosanne, I know her and love her. But Tina Fey was a button-down, seemingly boring normal human who is a really great boss, and that did everybody a great service.



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Annabelle Gurwitch is beginning a nationwide book tour, which includes workshops. You can see a list of her forthcoming appearances on her website: annabellegurwitch.com

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