

# Annabelle Gurwitch's New Book Asks Questions About Aging

By JUDITH NEWMAN

**Fashion & Style | Books Of Style**

## I'm Not Getting Better, I'm Getting Older

Annabelle Gurwitch, actress and writer, still loves to perform but says she has no illusions about which way her career, and life, are headed. Credit Annie Tritt for The New York Times



“No more prostitutes,”

Annabelle Gurwitch

says as we swill our pinot grigio in the lobby bar of the Shutters hotel in Santa Monica, Calif. “It’s tragic. Playing prostitutes used to be my specialty.” The actress/author and I are gleefully debating everything in life we must leave behind now that we’re over 50, and everything we must embrace.

There is much we disagree on. For example, I tell her, and I’m sure this is deeply comforting, that she’s still totally believable as a prostitute. But regarding clothing, we reach a consensus. No to frilled collars and rompers (“unless I’m playing a prisoner or a mental patient”), yes to Eileen Fisher. “Her clothes give you authority,” Ms. Gurwitch says. “You look like an elder statesman in a sci-fi movie about a dystopian future.”

While there are many things Ms. Gurwitch thinks she can’t get away with anymore, she knows there is one thing she can pull off beautifully: a heinous crime. “Because as a woman over 50 in L.A., I’m invisible,” she says cheerfully.

“That’s ridiculous,” I reply, as a waiter ignores frantic signals for a second bottle.

Annabelle Gurwitch is a funny woman, as anyone who has read of her previous struggles with being sacked (“Fired!”) and being married (“You Say Tomato, I Say Shut Up”) can attest. In her latest book, [“I See You Made an Effort: Compliments, Indignities, and Survival Stories From the Edge of 50”](#) (Blue Rider Press), she tackles aging, not just as a millstone but a milestone. She writes about what she calls “the 50s moments.”

Knowing, for example, that the language you reserved for great literature is now applicable to skin creams: (“I used to say Proust had a profound effect on my life. Now it’s Crème de Mer”). Or when you realize that your fantasies about

younger men are no longer the snaked-hipped rock star, but the guy at the Apple Genius Bar who understands your electronic devices. It's the selling of your parents' home; the realization that your teenager is too embarrassed to make eye contact with you in public; but most of all, it's the connoisseurship of disease. "When I was young, I knew there was [cancer](#), and I knew it was bad," she says. "But now I've become a person who knows there are 'bad' cancers and 'good' cancers. It's like: 'Oh, [pancreatic cancer](#), I'm so sorry. [Basal cell skin cancer](#) — congratulations!' "

At the center of the book is a serious question: How are we supposed to age? She convincingly argues that there is no longer a template. Recalling that her own mother became a grandmother at 50, she says: "She was very proud to be a grandmother. You could call her matronly, and she was happy. Now, if someone called me matronly. ... Oh my God!"

Now, too, because so many of us waited until our 30s and 40s to have babies, we are simultaneously caring for young children and old parents, while still being expected to be fit, dewy and Botoxed as we stare into the abyss. Even that abyss has become clouded with unforeseen complexities. Ms. Gurwitch recounts a hilariously awful night, helping with the assisted suicide of a terminally ill friend. It should have been a period of solemn peace. Instead, as the friend was headed toward the white light, "I had to shake her awake because everyone had forgotten to ask her her computer password."

Ms. Gurwitch did not expect that aging would bring with it this kind of wallop; she pretty much took Deborah Harry's 1979 tune "[Die Young Stay Pretty](#)" as her personal anthem. She grew up Jewish in the South, descended from fur trappers and bootleggers: "They called us 'colorful', which in the South is code for 'a family filled with crime.'" Her father made and lost several fortunes, so there were a lot of hasty retreats, financial uncertainty that may have nevertheless provided useful lessons in reinvention. In 1980, she left Florida for New York City and the Experimental Theater Wing at N.Y.U., which consisted of "a lot of pot-smoking, massage and moving through space."

The actress Felicity Huffman, who, like Ms. Gurwitch, is over 50, recalled that they "were at a lot of auditions together."

"She seemed like the quintessential pretty, cool, chic New York girl, but then you get to know her and you had this bonus of weirdness," said Ms. Huffman, who noted that her own [estrogen](#) levels are so low she can't remember the PIN on her debit card.

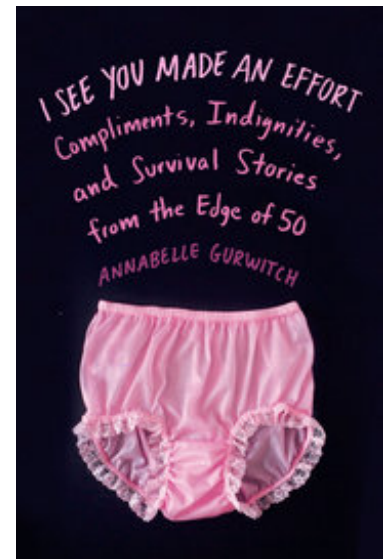
When Ms. Gurwitch eventually moved to Los Angeles in 1989, movie and TV roles (if not stardom) abounded. Then, in 2003, Woody Allen [fired](#) her from his Off Broadway flop "[Writer's Block](#)." That devastating yet amusing experience grew into a theater piece, a book and then a documentary, in which both stars and civilians recounted their best getting-canned stories. Ms. Gurwitch then gathered more hyphens as an author, NPR commentator, filmmaker, activist and guest humorist on chat shows.

She still loves to perform, but she has no illusions about which way her career, and life, are headed.

"Years ago in New York, I was playing a lady-in-waiting in 'The Red Snake,' an updated Jacobean tragedy by the beat poet Michael McClure," she says. "There were stunts in the play, and I had to wear kneepads under my velvet gown. I was handed a pair — last worn by Meryl Streep — they crossed out her name and Sharpied mine in. And that is the closest I've ever gotten, or will get, to working with her."

Ms. Gurwitch considers herself primarily a writer now (and a "schlepper"— she and her husband, the television writer Jeff Kahn, live in Los Angeles with a teenage son who still doesn't drive). But actual stardom has eluded her.

In her new book, she says: "I have a chapter called Hollywood Adjacent, because when you get to a certain age, if



you're not already a star making a tremendous amount of money, you're just not in that universe. I can still work as an actress, but I'd still never be in Hollywood. Hollywood is a machine to build the careers of very young people."

When her pal Bill Maher emails me to say she's been remarkably calm about turning 50 "perhaps because she looks 30," she shoots back: "He's lying. I cried at dinner with him when I started writing this book, and he got all scared because he thought people at the other tables would think he was making me cry."

Still, as she puts it: "This fake idea that 40 is the new 30, or 50 is the new 40, has come up to bite us on the behind. If you're 50, you're not 40. There's just a difference. You know it inside." Ms. Gurwitch contemplates her empty glass. "I know the phrase was meant to say, 'Oh, many things are possible for you,' but it also raises expectations — and negative ones, in my opinion. Because you are a different person, and if you don't recognize that, you're missing the opportunity for both misery and for joy that can be had by taking the opportunities of this landmark age."

Oh, there it is. Finally!

Our second bottle arrives.