

Has Fran Lebowitz mellowed? Don't count on it

By SHINAN GOVANI Star Columnist Fri., April 6, 2018



"I've never been interested in people who knew less than me," says Fran Lebowitz. (BRIGITTE LACOMBE)

But has your position on avocados evolved at all?

On the horn with one of America's all-time wits — the secret love child of Dorothy Parker and Oscar Wilde, not to mention "first-rate conversationalist, hall-of-fame bibliomaniac ... a gal-about-town, the

soul of the city and ... snappy dresser,” as one windy valentine once put it — I was more than prepared to ask the tough questions.

Since once famously declaring “I don’t like avocados. They’re the mayonnaise of vegetables,” I was curious to know how Fran Lebowitz was managing in this era we live in now of Peak Guacamole and omnipresent avocado toast.

“They have become as avoidable as kiwi once was,” came the familiar voice, both wanton and deadpan, the other day. “But often, you can’t detect the avocados in food, which is not something I can say for kiwi.”

All things considered, “I don’t hate avocados as much as I hate mayonnaise. Let me be clear about that.”

Goodness. Could it be? Was the indomitable Ms. Lebowitz — famous for some four decades now for her signature sulk and her trademark sneer — kind of mellowing?

The very notion was disabused soon enough, when we got onto the subject of grown men flashing their knees in public. An avowed opponent of shorts-on-men in metropolitan settings, the curmudgeonry reappeared in splendid form when she restated her stance.

“Grown men only wore shorts when in the backyard ... or playing tennis, when I was young. This is one of the worst changes in society, I’m telling you. It’s the infantilizing of our culture! To have to sit next to men wearing shorts on the subway. It’s repulsive. It’s ridiculous.”

Well then.

To Fran is to opine, after all.

You might be interested in

Due in Toronto this month for two semiregular gusts of performative pensées — she often calls herself the “Willy Loman of literature” — Lebowitz is, as ever, willing to be coaxed on any number of topics. All the more remarkable when you consider that Lebowitz remains one of the few people who happily lives with zero social media, no computer nor mobile phone. Plus, the 67-year-old hasn’t actually published a book since the early 1980s, making a career essentially out of writer’s block — or, what she calls, more accurately, a “writer’s blockade.”

How does she do it? Seemingly, she absorbs the culture almost by osmosis, playing a role that’s been going ever since the publication of her first book *Metropolitan Life* in 1978 (which made her famous, like cover-of-Interview magazine famous) and then was parlayed into a role of roving wit, must-have party guest and even a recurring role as a judge on *Law & Order*.

Asked what helped to form her voice, she gamely talks about the older people — specifically, the older gay men — who took her, a high-school dropout, under their wing when she showed up in Manhattan all those decades ago.

“There was all this hanging around, talking, sitting in bars ... that’s the history of art: hanging out!”

Of the necessity of befriending older people — key to an understanding of history and absorbing references — she says, “Truthfully, I’ve never been interested in people who knew less than me.”

There's also this: because she stopped drinking and doing drugs at the ripe old age of 19, "no one remembers anything except me!" she exclaims of that hurly-burly time that included, among other things, the era of Studio 54. "People are always saying ... I don't remember! Ask Fran!"

Getting her going on that moment in time, I'm instantly reminded about a comment in the documentary about her, *Public Speaking*, directed by Martin Scorsese in 2010. When discussing the toll that AIDS took on the creative community in New York in the 1980s, she remarked, "Everybody talks what artists were lost, but it was an audience that was lost, too ... a discerning audience. An audience with a high level of connoisseurship is as important to the culture as artists."

The extent of that loss remains indubitably hard to calculate. It wiped out a whole subculture.

Like a human gumball machine, Lebowitz is of course also ready to roll out an observation on nearly any boldface name. Of her chum Andy Warhol, she casts a little doubt on the provenance of the most famous epigram ascribed to him, the idea that "in the future, everybody will be famous for 15 minutes."

"I'm not sure if he actually said that," she says. "First of all, Andy wasn't the world's biggest talker. It may have been someone else who said that and he was told that ... which is more likely."

About the whole Warhol Factory phenomenon, she posits, "It has influence for sure, but the problem is, it has no context today."

This somehow leads us to a sidebar about Zsa Zsa Gabor, which then takes us down an alleyway of conversation about Malcolm Forbes, the billionaire media mogul who's still best remembered, perhaps, for throwing one of the most famous parties of all time: his 70th, in 1989 in Tangiers, Morocco, co-hosted by Elizabeth Taylor. Naturally, Lebowitz was there, flying with pals such as Calvin Klein and Barry Diller.

"I remember numerous things, but mostly that it was in the summer," she recalls, "and it was a thousand degrees. And the hotel everybody was staying at — the air conditioning didn't work. This is the sort of thing I tend to remember: what doesn't work!"

"The party itself was quite fun," she adds. "I mean ... I happen to like parties. I know everyone says they hate them ... people say they hate them, yet it's those people I always see at them!"

Of Lebowitz's many famous BFFs, I'm particularly intrigued by her many-decades-long friendship with Toni Morrison. They're so close that she flew with Morrison to Oslo when she received her Nobel Prize ... and yet it doesn't exactly seem like an obvious match.

They met in 1978, she fills me in, when they were paired up for the author's event. And, yes, she thought it was a weird pairing too. "That's ridiculous!" she boomed then, but the reading went on as planned — "Toni Morrison wasn't famous then" — and they've been in each other's lives since.

"We're not obviously alike ... and yet we are alike in many ways," she says. "I will say: Toni is one of the few people I genuinely seek advice from and Toni is the only truly wise person I know."

Lebowitz — an autocrat of opinion — soliciting advice from someone else? Now that's interesting.

Zooming forward to the hyper-present, we briefly touch on the #MeToo movement — "For a woman my age, the idea that this is happening is astonishing. No one ever thought that this would happen. That men would be exposed?" — but it's the oft-banded term "witch-hunt" that gets her extra surly.

“First of all, the phrase is absurd. The phrase comes from the Salem Witch Trials and the reason the phrase is germane to the Salem Witch Trials is that there were no witches! The phrase today is used to mean the exact opposite!”

Finally, because it is impossible to get through any conversation without the T-word — Trump — she paints a vivid picture of the election night viewing party she attended at the home of then-Vanity Fair editor Graydon Carter on the night of the presidential election in November 2016. Yes, it was an enviable who’s who in the mix and, yes, she confirms they had Japanese that night. Indeed, there is nothing she doesn’t remember about that day because there are “three days seared entirely into my memory: one was the Kennedy assassination; the second 9/11. And the third, the day of that election. I remember every single second of that day ...”

Lebowitz, needless to say, has oodles more to say about the body politic and she will, no doubt, during her talk in Toronto.

Oh, but one final, final thing: is she — ever the Savile Row buff — still getting her signature suits from Anderson & Sheppard? Yes, except she doesn’t go to them anymore in London: “They come twice a year to me.”

“They have a dummy of me or something. I’ve never seen it.”

Fran Lebowitz: In Conversation, presented by the Koffler Centre of the Arts as part of the Dorothy Shoichet Lecture Series, happens April 21 and 22 at the Hot Docs Ted Rogers Cinema. Aside from a limited number of VIP tickets, both events are sold out. See kofflerarts.org for information.