

Edwina Throsby: Fran Lebowitz welcome to the Sydney Opera House.

Fran Lebowitz: Thank you.

ET: It's good to have you here. I'd like to start by talking about your childhood in 1950's New Jersey. When I've heard you speak about it before it's like you're describing an entirely different world, like.

FL: Oh, absolutely.

ET: A different planet, I mean what was your childhood like? Was it?

FL: I don't know anyone else who enjoyed their childhood as much as I did. Partially I think that's because I'm so suited to being a child, you know, I am really suited to a lack of adult responsibility. And so you know there were childish responsibilities that I found somewhat onerous because I don't like any responsibility. But the main responsibility I hate is supporting myself and since no one was expecting me to earn a living when I was six I found it delightful. But it's true that, I mean I lived in a little town, it was a very pretty town, a very nice town, and it was an era like I was born in 1950. I didn't know any women that worked you know. Mothers – which is what we called women and we called men fathers – didn't work. And so they didn't really want you in the house all the time. Now mothers or women, want to be with their children a lot because a lot of time they're not. But we weren't allowed to stay in the house, I mean I'm talking about on a weekend you know unless it was pouring with rain.

ET: So what was she doing when you were out in the neighbourhood?

FL: I have no idea, she's probably thinking thank God that kid is out of the house, so that's my guess.

ET: What were they like your mother and father?

FL: They were extremely conventional is what I would say. My father both his parents were immigrants, his father was Czech, his mother was Hungarian. He was the youngest of five children. He was a child during the depression. His father lost his business during the depression. And when he was 18 he enlisted in the Army and he was in the war in Germany, the entire war. The weird thing about my father being in the Army was there's a huge army base in New Jersey called Fort Dix, that's where all boys from New Jersey went for basic training, they sent my father to the south for basic training for some reason. You know I always said this was to prepare him for the anti-Semitism of the Nazis. And he told me that the boys, I mean they were boys you know who were at that army camp where it was Tennessee or something, this is in the 1940s so there was no electricity in lots of parts of the South, he said they had never worn shoes before. And they were all in agony because the first shoes they wore were army boots which are quite you know abrasive. And the first day he was there one of the guys asked him can I touch your head and my father said why? And he said I want to feel your horns because they were told that Jews had horns.

ET: Oh you're kidding...

FL: So my father managed to ingratiate himself because soon after he arrived there it was Christmas and on any army post even now there has to be someone on watch 24

hours a day even if you're in Tennessee and obviously the Nazis aren't coming to attack. So it was Christmas Eve and my father said he volunteered because he didn't care it was Christmas Eve and after that they liked him. Also, his parents were kosher and his mother told him when he left eat whatever they give you, don't get sick by not eating. So my father loved basic training because he discovered bacon and they had pork chops, he always had three pork chops for breakfast it was delicious. So I was always asking my father about the war, he never would talk about it and he only told a couple stories that weren't really war stories. When other men would talk about the war in some kind of jocular way he would just say I don't know what war you were in. But when my father was dying he talked about nothing but the war and I realised that I never knew him. Because you know like 70 years later or 60 years later, whatever it was he was so hunted by this and he would talk about it non-stop. And I thought.. I never knew him.

ET: And he had been repressing those stories his whole life?

FL: Yes, he never talked about it. Those men of that generation were taught never to talk about anything personal or like I would never have thought of my father as being sentimental, but when I died and I cleaned out the house he had kept everything I ever gave him. My mother had a much different background because she was from Connecticut, from a place with very few Jews, as the town I grew up in had relatively few Jews. So my mother acquired these kind of WASP values from the town, which she conveyed to me. And so in a way this hindered me. I was a recipient of her instructions, that had to do with grammar, manners, all those kind of things. I hear this stuff in my head and I tell other people what to do, I mean not little children – I yell at the TV set if someone makes a grammatical error. This is actually the perfect description of my childhood. I would say to my mother can I please have an apple and she would say may I please have an apple. And I would say may I please have an apple and she would say no, that was my childhood.

ET: Before we leave your childhood and adolescence, your adolescence was quite turbulent on the whole.

FL: Horrible. But I mean everybody, I mean maybe not everybody's you know. I mean I used to say there's only two people that like high school, you know the captain of the football team and his girlfriend. You know the main reason I hated high school was algebra because I really couldn't do it you know. And I was a fantastic grammar school student by the way I don't want to brag, but I was an amazing student in grammar school. Because mostly it seemed to me what we had to do was like draw pilgrims and I was fantastic at this. I used to practice it, I used to draw extra pilgrims, I used to think like I'm going to really practice this in case there's a pilgrim emergency and somebody needs a pilgrim drawing. And I could do the work very easily, but once we got -- arithmetic was always hard, but algebra I just and I started failing in school everything.

ET: So algebra was like a trigger for that?

FL: Yes.

ET: Kind of dominoed down to everything else?

FL: And I just stopped paying attention to school and I sort of was angry all the time and I was bored in school, and I started getting really bad grades and getting suspended all the time. And yeah, once -- I mean it may not have been just the algebra, but once I got

to that, you know, grade in school I started failing in school and then I was constantly punished and my parents were furious at me, really angry at me. And so I was constantly at war with them until I finally got expelled.

ET: And you said you got expelled for nonspecific surliness.

FL: Well because I was in public school and I don't know the principal or the guidance counsellor you know said to my parents, she's never going to get into college you know if she stays here. I mean my adolescence was a constant war, you know, I mean this was not unusual for people to be fighting with their parents. They don't do it so much now it's interesting to me, I mean the girls fighting with their mothers when I was young, when you were a teenager was routine and constant you know. And now I mean when my friends had children and they were that age they didn't fight with them that much. And I always thought it's because you know my friends and people my age and certainly people younger they like their children more, they actually like them more, so I don't think they love them more they like them more.

ET: So you had no sense that your parents liked you at all?

FL: No they did not.

ET: They were quite explicit about that?

FL: My mother used to say to me you know I always love you, but I don't always like you. And I think that she never liked me and I can tell you that they never forgave me for getting expelled from school ever, that was like. One of the things my mother really wanted me to go to Radcliffe, which doesn't even exist anymore, but Radcliffe was a girls' school in Harvard.

ET: Did they encourage your ambitions to be a writer at all?

FL: You know they didn't encourage me and they didn't discourage it, they didn't really care. You know I, it was quite hard being a girl when I was young if you were a girl, it was fabulous for boys. But the good thing was about being a girl was -- the bad part of being a girl is that no one takes you seriously. The good part is because they don't take you seriously they didn't mind if you announced that you wanted to be a writer. Because if I had been a boy and said that my father would've come down on me, he would've said don't be ridiculous do you think you could earn a living being a writer. If I had been a boy I would had to have been an upholsterer. They didn't discourage me, they didn't encourage, they didn't care. In fact, they never talked about my future other than going to Radcliff, they never talked about it. And sometimes you know when people ask me did your parents want you to be a writer, no my parents wanted me to be a wife.

ET: Yeah.

FL: That's what they expected me to be, that's what they wanted me to be. And not just my parents, but you know all the parents I knew they expected me to be a wife, that's what they wanted me to be. The only thing I remember my mother ever saying about my future was she once said to me, you should marry a college professor because you like to read so much that if you marry a college professor you would always live in a place where there are a lot of books, that was her advice for my future. She never would have said you should be a college professor, that would never have occurred to her.

ET: Was there any point in your adolescence where you seriously consider growing up and becoming a wife?

FL: No. Well you know I say no, not really you know not really. You know for someone of my age you know the idea ... At the point which you start realising that you're gay in those days was such a shocking thing to think. It's something you let yourself you know in on very little. And truthfully you never heard of that, it didn't exist. That's just something I can never convey to people who are younger, it did not exist in the culture, you never saw it, you never heard about it, you never saw it. You know and if I wasn't such a bookworm I would've known what it was. You could only think that if you never saw it at all, you never heard of it, it didn't exist. So you know this discovery in yourself of this thing where you're the only person on the planet earth. I knew it existed, but I remember being probably like maybe 12 years old and I remember exactly you know the thought that came into my head was well I guess if there's such a thing as lesbians someone has to be them, but why does it have to be me! Because I knew that the life that I lived, the world that I lived in I would not be able to live in, you know, that I would be. Now that was my response, other people's response was I'm going to pretend and stay here, that never occurred to me, that really never occurred to me. So I didn't want to be thrown out of the world I lived in, I liked the world I lived in. But it was very clear to me that that would not be possible.

ET: So you were expelled from school, you had a life to fill, and you had to decide where you were going to live.

FL: Well when I first got thrown out of school my parents sent me to live with my mother's sister. Partially this was because my grandparents, my mother's parents had retired and moved to the town where we lived and my mother didn't want her parents to know that I had gotten thrown out of school.

ET: Did they have any inkling that you were gay?

FL: No, I'm certain not, I mean they -- people often say to me you know were your parents you know about you being gay, I said I don't know they never mentioned to me, they never mentioned it to me.

ET: Ever?

FL: Ever. Okay, so it never came up, they never mentioned to me. It's like when my first book came out you know and after that people would say did your father like your book, I said I don't know he never mentioned that he read it, I'm not certain he did. So they never mentioned it to me. But they sent me to live with my aunt and uncle, I think my uncle was German and he was an engineer and I guess the idea was that they would be stricter. Like their, somehow my parents' idea is why I failed in school was they weren't strict enough, they were extremely strict you know, that it must be their fault and they were too soft on me you know. But then I turned 18 after I lived there, I lived there for about six months and I moved to New York. And I remember I walked into my parents' bedroom and I said I'm moving to New York I'm going to be a writer.

Chapter 2

ET: When you first arrived in New York did it meet your expectations, which I imagine were pretty lofty?

FL: Well it did because you know we lived near New York, so we came in a lot you know and once I got to be about 10 for my birthday I got to choose what did you want to do for your birthday and I would always say I want to go to the Museum of Modern Art. I was completely obsessed with it and so it was still there when I got there. Yeah, it was.

ET: But there's a difference visiting as a kid and living there as an adult.

FL: Yeah, I mean me this sounds not true but it is true that my main worry was I'm very weak physically and my main worry is I can't open jars – I've had a lifetime of handing these to my father to open. I hand things to strange men on planes, I hand things, can you open this for me. So I thought you have had your last pickle Fran there's no way you're going to be able to open this jar.

ET: But that's living alone that's not living in the city.

FL: I was very, no I wasn't, I was very excited to do it.

ET: So when you arrived how did you identify, find and then befriend your people?

FL: I moved to New York in like 1970, it was extremely dangerous then New York. Here's the thing about New York, you know, whenever you move there you know if it was 1940, 1970, 2000 – that's New York for you. And then as it starts to change because it always does you start complaining. "New York used to be better!!". There are people who are 30 saying "Wasn't New York better five years ago?!". So at that time New York was very dangerous, was my impression of it, it was extremely dangerous. All my habits of living in New York are the habits of someone who lived there in the 70s. I see people on the subway, people who are young, they put their bag down next to them. I think are you out of your mind? If I have a pencil on the subway I'm going... you're not getting this pencil from me!

ET: And you might be able to use it as a weapon.

FL: Yes, you never know! I mean I used to walk down the street in New York, a lot of girls did, if I was walking by myself at night you would take your keys and put them between your fingers so that you could like. I didn't know anyone, I just walked around all the time. And there was the New School which is college, had a lounge, a student's lounge and I would just go and hang around there and I met lots of people. I would hang around there, I was the age of going to college so it wasn't that weird. The Village Voice which was a newspaper came out every Wednesday and I would look for jobs and the problem that I had was I had no skills. I didn't have a college diploma, I didn't know how to type which is the main skill a girl needed to get any kind of job. And so I would look for jobs that like required zero skills. So I would look for jobs and I would think "Oh I could do that". It would say job: no skills required.

ET: And what were they, they were like cleaning and?

FL: Yeah, I was a cleaning lady. And I have friends that I've had since like I was you know 19 or 20, I was their cleaning lady that's how I met them.

ET: Yeah.

FL: I got a lot of cleaning jobs because I would clean venetian blinds which all rental apartments had, they were metal and no one would clean them, but I would clean them. And I once went to my parents' house and I had these red stripes on my hand and my mother said what is wrong with your hands. I said I had a job cleaning venetian blinds and it cuts your hands. My mother said that's not how you clean venetian blinds you take them down, put them in the bathtub. Well my life became perfect! It's probably the most valuable thing my mother ever told me. I would come in, I would take them down, put them in the bathtub and I would spend the day like reading the books at the people whose house I was in. So I did those kind of jobs, I was a peddler, I sold belts in the street. I did every kind of job. I drove a cab.

ET: Did you have a favourite?

FL: I hated working.

ET: Prewriting job?

FL: You know what I hate to work. I just think I would be perfectly happy if I didn't have to work. I am like the perfect person to not work.

ET: What like a 1950s housewife?

FL: No, like an heiress. Like I buy lottery tickets okay and I know it's stupid. The goal of that lottery ticket is spend your life lying on the sofa reading, Fran. That's the goal.

ET: So back to those early days, you have this aspiration to be a writer, you're doing all of those shitty jobs in New York city to make a bit of money. What was the first big break for you?

FL: I saw an ad one day, I would work like five or six days a week and I would take Wednesdays off when the Voice came out. And I saw an ad I was, I think at that point I was selling belts in the street and I saw an ad that said that an underground magazine, that's what they called themselves then needed someone to sell advertising. So I thought a magazine this is my big break. So I called the person I applied for this job, it was a very tiny magazine and it was published out of this woman's apartment. And I applied for this job and I beat out like 10 actually qualified people. Because I thought if I get this job I could probably get to write for this magazine. And I got this job.

ET: How did you beat out the others?

FL: I talked her into hiring me. I never sold a single ad because I never tried to because I knew no one read this magazine, I couldn't possibly bring myself to you know like say put an ad in the magazine and no one will read it and you won't be able to. I got a couple like little restaurants to like put an ad in the magazine and you know let me eat here like once a week or something like that. But I became very close friends with this woman and I started writing for this magazine.

ET: And then you got some runs on the board there and then at some point you started writing for Interview magazine, Andy Warhol's magazine.

FL: Oh it's after this magazine because I worked for this magazine, which was called Changes and there was a guy there named Ed McCormick he's still alive and he wrote for Changes and he also wrote for Interview, he was a very good writer. And I was

writing book reviews for Changes and there was another girl, actually a woman she was probably 25, much older than me, and she was writing movie reviews. We were movie mad when I was young, everybody I knew was like obsessed with movies, we went to the movies 24 hours a day. And she got an assignment writing something for The New York Times, which was like an unheard-of thing to happen to someone. So the woman on this Changes said to me, I said can I write the movie reviews because she's going to be writing this thing, she said yes. So I wrote these movie reviews, they were funny they weren't you know. And instantly, people started like noticing my writing because of course people were very interested in movies not in books. Then when this woman came back from writing this article the owner of the magazine said well you can't do it anymore because she's good at doing it. So I asked his friend of mine Ed do you think you could get me like you know an interview with Interview magazine to see if I can write because it was mostly about movies Interview then. And so he did and I went to The Factory. Now people, of course, who are young think I'm talking about the 1960s Factory which is the tinfoil one – not that Factory, the one after that. I'm not that old. And so this was after Andy had been shot. So I went to the Factory, the door opened when the elevator, when it opened there was this steel door closed you couldn't get in, and there was a piece of paper pasted to it and it said knock loudly and announce yourself. So I banged on the door and someone said who's there and I said Valerie Solanas. And Andy opened the door I was shocked. First of all, this will give you some idea of how smart Andy was. I say Valerie Solanas and so he opens the door, you know, I would not open the door. But even though it was called Andy Warhol's Interview for some reason it never occurred to me he would be there, I never thought about it you know. So I went in, I had a meeting with the editor, he said what do you want to do, I said I want to write movie reviews and I just made these demands. I mean no one read Interview, it wasn't like the New York Times. And I said I want, I'd like to write movie reviews, okay we'll pay you \$10 a review. I thought wow this is fantastic. My rent was \$120 a month. He said, I said I want to have my own column, he said okay. I said I want to have the back page be my column, he said okay. I said I just want to review bad movies, I want to call my column The Best of the Worst, he said okay. And I started doing it and I would do like 10 reviews, you know, so I went to screenings all the time. I said I have the greatest life of anyone, I spend all day long going to screenings, I write these reviews, I get paid a hundred dollars you know for doing. That my life instantly became fantastic.

Chapter 3.

ET: Did you like Andy Warhol?

FL: No.

ET: Why not?

FL: He was a vampire, you know, I mean you're not supposed to say this, I mean he's such a you know myth now. He did not like me either I have to, you know, had he liked me maybe I would have liked him more, but I think probably not. You know, I mean he was like and I never would talk around him, he really disliked that. And it's in his diary, he said she wouldn't talk around me, she thinks I'm going to steal, he stole everything you know. And so I just kept my distance from him, I never. Now certainly there was a

long period of my life where I saw him every single night of my life, but that was just because we went to the same places, you know I didn't deliberately see him. He never liked me, I never liked him. I never hung around him in that way. I liked Fred Hughes very much who was there, I got along better with Paul who's, I mean no I never liked him, he did not like me.

ET: But you say you were very much sort of on the same scene, going to the same places?

FL: Yeah, I went to the same places so I saw him all the time and there were lots of people that I saw you know every night of my life for 10 years who I didn't like you know.

ET: So who did you like in that sort of whole period, I mean it was Max's Kansas City, it was those kinds of places right.

FL: Well I loved Max's, I mean and there's you know, I mean when people say you know New York used to be better or whatever, you know, there never has been anyplace like Max's since Max's that is absolutely true. And that it's not true there's many other places you know that they're, you know, they're replaced by something else. You know it was really like a moment in time and -- but for me what you have to understand is that I just thought this was New York, this is exactly what I thought it would be like. This is exactly what I thought New York would be like.

ET: So what was so special about Max's?

FL: I hardly ever went to gay bars you know, I mean in my whole life I bet I didn't go 10 times, I hated them. In the front of Max's, which was a bar was basically very straight and it was mostly painters you know, which is what we used to call artists because they were mostly painter. And I would just walk through the bar like it didn't exist, I didn't care about it at all. And the back room you know was much gayer you know. It was kind of the only place like that where you could go to talk, because it wasn't a dancing place, it wasn't a discotheque. When people talk about Max's sometimes now and they talk about music, they're talking about the upstairs of Max's where bands played you know where sometimes I would go, but that's not why I went, I didn't care. And lots of times people say so you saw Iggy Pop? And yeah, I saw Iggy Pop because he was upstairs, but I would never have gone to see these bands, I didn't care at all. I mean there's no one my age who cared less about rock 'n roll than me, no one. So you could go there, find interesting people to talk to and you could always pick someone up. New York in those days was – I can't think of a nice way to put it – it was a whore house. I mean the level of promiscuity of people my age in New York in the 70's before AIDS never existed before. And I used to say at a certain point that if they knew what was going on down here they would be down here with the National Guard. It was completely separate from the rest of the world in that way. And you know once AIDS happened of course that stopped, but it was like incredibly fun.

ET: And how important was that whole scene for your creativity, for your writing?

FL: Oh, it was essential, I mean I can't imagine my life without it. You know the same way, to me you know it's like asking a doctor, so if you hadn't gone to medical school could you still be a doctor. You know if you asked me if I hadn't been involved with those people in that scene and New York wasn't like that at that second I would have

been a different person. It was more formative for me probably than any other experiences in my life, also because the people that I hung around with from back home were extremely, extremely, extremely mean and judgmental. And they were reading my stuff and they would like comment on it and I knew that's who read Interview. So I mean I think that the audience for an artist is really important because and I think is part of the art you know. And that's one of the reasons I think that certain artforms have really suffered because the audiences are not as discerning you know. So that if you knew you know that these really, really incredibly brilliant mean people are reading your writing you know you step up I think you know. You see this certainly with performers, you absolutely see that.

ET: One of the things that you've written that I really like was your first ever piece for New York Times in 1987 about the impact of AIDS on the artistic community in New York and I suppose in the world. I mean, it's hard to underestimate the impact of that particular holocaust.

FL: Well you know it changed the culture for the worse. Aside from the, you know, the men you know probably, not probably but if I want to sound like an extremely nice person, you know the most important thing was the human tragedy. But the cultural tragedy was at least equally important because of the people, there was a photographer named Peter Hujar, he was one of my best friends, and he died a long time ago. And the Morgan Library has currently this big exhibit of his work. They made a movie that they showed because all of his 5,700 contact sheets are there and they made a movie using all these still images. And so I saw all these people that hadn't seen in a million years because they've been dead for 25 years. And when this movie was over I said to the curator who was too young to remember any of these people, I said one of the stunning things to me about these pictures is the amount of talent that is in those pictures of people that you never heard of, you're never going to hear of them, you know, they are people who. Now these kinds of artists, Peter himself who you know was poverty-stricken and unknown and now is you know the most important photographer who ever lived. The kind of work they did was you know so peripheral to the main culture, but if the culture had ch -- like it's very hard for me to decide even though I spend a lot of time thinking about this, did the culture becomes so much more accepting because of AIDS you know or if there had not been AIDS and these kinds of artists would they have gotten into the mainstream culture. It's really a hard thing because AIDS is the reason why there is an acceptance of homosexuality, because the AIDS made it impossible to hide your homosexuality. It's just like you know you can't sneak a cigarette on an aeroplane because there's smoke you know. So you know everybody, you know, when people say you know so and so was in the closet, I always say that is just a stupid thing to say everybody was. I mean when we used to say about that people what we meant to us you know like to use you were in the closet you know that's ridiculous.

ET: Or to themselves perhaps.

FL: Yeah. But we meant really to us because there were people who pretended. But in the world, you couldn't get a job. But once AIDS happened you know you couldn't like hide the fact that you were dying, especially a very recognizable disease. You could see AIDS in people, it wasn't like a thing like when people just drifted away in some fairy tale, it was hideous. So I think AIDS really caused it you know and also, I believe caused the idea of gay marriage, which no one ever thought of. When people say to me you know thank you for fighting for gay marriage, I say I never fought for gay marriage, I

never even thought of it, it never came into my head, it never occurred to me. You know so I never heard anyone say it, I never heard of it. You know I think that it was like a deal people made like in their minds, don't give me AIDS and I'll stop having sex with 15,000 strangers every month you know. Because that's how it spread like that you know. I will lead a dull life like straight people, I will be good I promise if you just you know. I know you voted on here we did not you know. If it had been put to a vote I wouldn't voted for it because so many people wanted it, but I didn't care about it. I never, I couldn't think of anything worse. To me like I just, I was astonished by it, but I absolutely believe that it had to do with AIDS.

ET: I mean, I guess what happened was that AIDS politicised a generation because it had to, you know, people had to sort of fight for visibility, but also for rights and medicine and.

FL: Well some people did, I mean but there was gay activism before AIDS, you know, it was the thing I found ludicrous by the way. I mean I actually thought like this is ridiculous. First of all, I never ever thought it would work ever.

ET: Why not?

FL: To me the hatred of homosexuality was something in the world like trees that was it. I was never that kind of person who thought like I'm not going to spend my life fighting for some impossible thing. And so once I came to New York and found my own life I didn't care, who wants to be in that world I didn't care. You know, I was very happy in my life, now most people weren't, you know, so I mean most gay people were not happy you know in that situation life. I was used to, you know, I mean the word hiding is kind of funny, I was used to that like two lives you know. I am used to it still you know like when people say you don't talk about this and I said I'm not talking about it. It's not my habit you know I'm too old you know. So that I, but there were, I mean like there were people that I knew who did that and I just thought they were silly. I also very much associated with California, I thought well that's a dopey California thing that's what they do in California because they have no culture there you know, that's what they do you know. But you know the AIDS activism some of it I was very opposed to I have to say. I mean I fought with Act Up. One of the things they did was out people and I was absolutely opposed to this, I thought it was horrible. I fought with them, but I also thought some of the things they did were very counterproductive. Like one of the things they did in New York, I think in other places too, was these things called 'die-ins' where they would lie in the middle of the street. And I remember getting in an argument with a guy saying in case people don't hate us enough I would really suggest to you that you make traffic worse. Because if there's one thing New York love is worse traffic! On top of everything else you want to be the cause of worst traffic, are you out of your mind?

ET: I think one of the things that was lost with all the people that died in the 80's and early 90's you know in that, at the apex of the AIDS crisis and you said this once that what died was a legacy of people and artists and creativity that didn't really leave a permanent record. You know these people's way of being creative was talking.

FL: Yeah and they didn't and they're gone, and there's no -- but there's no way to convey that sensibility you know, it's very hard to. You can, but it takes like hours like you know. People who are young have no context for it, none. You know you have to recreate the entire culture you know. There were some things from like the broader gay

culture that survived that people are aware of and that seemed never to change. This is an astonishing thing to me, I didn't know about this gay Mardi Gras here. But I was in Melbourne last few days I saw it on the news and I'm watching the news, the Australian news and I see Cher arrive at the airport and I think Cher?! How could it still be Cher. Is everyone going to this parade that age. No, no it turns out even these 20-year-olds they want to see Cher. So in the broader gay culture you know that kind of campy culture still it's still Cher.

ET: Nothing's changed.

FL: No, it's still Cher and maybe still Barbara Streisand, maybe still you know Marilyn Monroe, maybe still you know. That kind of is funny to me in a way it's as if like you know like when my mother was young she loved Clark Gable, it would be as if like now like an 18-year-old girl loved Clark Gable. I mean really still Clark Gable, isn't there someone new.

Chapter 3:

ET: So you spent a lot of time on college campuses given talks and things, but you didn't go to college yourself. But you know a lot about a lot of things and as you point out you're generally always right. How did you learn what you know?

FL: Reading.

ET: Just reading?

FL: I would say reading and just, I would say mostly reading. I mean, well I mean I'm old now so you know everyone old knows a lot of things. It's the upside of being old. I mean the real upside of being old, not quite as old as I am now, but when I was in my 50s, it was very enjoyable to be in your 50s. Like people you know who are not yet in their 50s think 50s are horrible, 50's are fantastic because that's exactly that point where I remember saying to myself now I know everything. Now I know everything and you still look okay, so like that's it. You know after you still maybe know everything, but you don't look okay. And I would say that I know a lot from reading, you know, I know a lot from paying attention, and I just know a lot from living a long time. But I think the reading is the most of it truthfully because I started doing it when I was a little kid and people didn't, you know, the reason I love to read is because it's better than life and I always felt that, you know even in periods of my life where I was quite happy you know it's better than life.

ET: So there is a lot of, there's a lot of discussion particularly in the United States, here as well on liberal college campus, about who's allowed to speak and who's not.

FL: Oh, ridiculous. I am so opposed to this. I find this shocking and I find it shocking that this is a left position you know. And this is why I hate us okay. I mean to me it's like it's jaw-dropping, really jaw-dropping. You know if you're offended, I mean first of all, to me being offended is a natural consequence of leaving your house. The only place I am not offended is in my apartment. Why? Because everything in my apartment I chose, I like everything in my apartment and I'm in my apartment and that's it and it's perfect. But the second I walk out the door other people. But the problem is other people of course, so other people who I did not choose unfortunately, not everyone in my subway car did I choose to be in the subway car.

ET: Trigger warnings?

FL: You know you might have your feelings hurt, you know you are going to have your feelings hurt a million times a day you better get used to it you know. I mean the best way to deal with that is hurt their feelings, that's what I do.

ET: So you've had an election in the United States which elected President Trump. Since then there's been a lot of talk out of the White House about and it's not just since then, it's been before then, but about a notion of the elite. Who are they talking about?

FL: Who are they talking about when they say that?

ET: Yeah.

FL: Smart people, they don't mean rich people, they mean smart people, they do not mean rich people. They love rich people. Everyone loves rich people now, to me this is absolutely the worst thing that could happen in the United States is there are no competing values to money. You know Americans always loved a buck, no question about it, but there really were competing values. In other words, there were lots of things that people respected and admired other than money. There's nothing now, nothing and there is a notion that making a lot of money is a result of being smart, which is a laughable thing. I always say to people if you think that you make a lot of money by being smart you have never met a rich person and you've never met a smart person.

ET: How has the new administration made you think about your country?

FL: Well I really hate to be blamed for him, like actually people have said to me, you elected him and I say not me you know. Well I can't say I've always had a tremendous amount of faith in my fellow Americans. First of all, you know he won by the Electoral College. The Electoral College is a horrible, horrible thing. You know what kind of democracy has an election and one person gets 3 million more votes than the other person and the other person wins. That's what the Electoral College does, that's why it will never, it cannot be banished without amendment to the Constitution and there's never going to be an amendment of the Constitution.

ET: And the thing about American democracies is that the entire electoral body doesn't vote. We have compulsory voting here in Australia, what do you think of that?

FL: You know I just found out about this like two days ago, I think it's a fantastic idea. It will never happen in the United States.

ET: Why not?

FL: First of all, Americans believe that they're too free for anything compulsory, despite the fact that we have a lot of compulsory stuff that's horrible. It will never happen, you know, I mean the not voting you know is something that I exempt myself from in the sense that I don't want to brag, I'm the best voter in the United States. I have voted, when I was young, you couldn't vote until you were 21 now you can vote at 18. From the age 21 I have voted in absolutely every election, including when you used to be able to vote in school board elections even though I never had any child in school. I'm a fantastic voter, I always vote and I always vote for the best person and they almost never win.

ET: And yet still not discouraged.

FL: I'm not. First of all, I have to tell you I love voting. I enjoy voting so much, it's like something like I look forward to voting.

ET: I love voting too.

FL: I love voting. After I like walk out of the voting I feel like very happy and big elections, like presidential elections. When I was, I don't -- it probably doesn't exist anymore, but when I was young there was an organisation called the League of Women Voters and my mother was in it. And so my mother was always at elections a poll watcher you know that someone who like signs you in. And now most of the poll watchers in New York they're pretty old people you know and so at big elections when they're you know presidential elections I always bring candy for the poll watchers and I always bring chocolates. And I just enjoy, I loved voting in the last presidential election because I thought now it's over Hillary Clinton is going to be president. I was so happy that day, that was like one of the happiest days of like the last five years of my life until when.

ET: Which was happiness followed by...

FL: Yes, by one of the worst nights of my life.

ET: So one of the things that's happened in the last few months is the Me Too movement. How related to that, how related is the Me Too movement to the Trump administration would you say?

FL: I don't think it is, I know a lot of people do. You know it never occurred to me until someone asked me about this and then they asked me about it and I thought about it and I don't think it is.

ET: Why not?

FL: I don't think it is, you know I really, I don't you know first of all, it's not affecting him okay. I have to say that it really surprised me, it's to me that an amazing thing that I can be so surprised because it never occurred to me that this would change, it never occurred to me. Just like being gay you know being a girl and a woman, having these things happen to you has always been true since the beginning of time, always true, true, true for millions of years and then in nine weeks it disappears. I mean I found that to be, I couldn't believe it. You know when it first started with Harvey and the rest of the first big group of you know men, I personally know over 90% of them. You know I knew millions of stories about all these guys except I never heard these rape stories.

ET: Right.

FL: You know I never heard any of the, ever heard violence. You know what I, but when people said they didn't know about Harvey that's just absurd. But the rape no, I never heard about it and I was shocked by that. But the other stuff about Harvey I never heard at all. I felt and I still do this is happening to Harvey because Harvey is not Harvey anymore, he's in a decline, the business is in a decline, his business is in a decline, he's not as powerful and I still believe that. This never would've happened to Harvey 10 years ago, not in a million years okay, not in a million years. So because it happened to Harvey you know that did prompt the other things that happened right after much more

I think than Donald Trump you know. As that was happened it seems like it was happening one a day, one a day, another one of these guys. I started like guessing, I would say to people like tick tock who's next! It seems to have died down to the point there's not one a second you know. I said well you know there's a lot of great jobs open, it's like a roulette. This is a really good time to be looking for one of these great jobs. They are, these jobs are fantastic jobs, these are among the best jobs you know, what can they do, give all these jobs to women. If you give all these jobs to women, give all big jobs to women and here's what you're going to get, you're going to get some bad bosses but you're not going to get this. This is something absolutely peculiar to men.

ET: So do you think that anything is going to shift out of this or do you think it's just going to go back?

FL: Yes, I do. I do because one thing that it's not so much morality that I'm counting on, but what I'm counting on is how already certain things that people might say or do they look out of fashion, that is much more dangerous to people than people looking bad okay. I think the fact that it just looks old-fashioned, it looks square, it looks corny. That will have much more effect, much, much more effect you know. I do, I do think it's changed, I don't think -- look here's what's not going to change. Men are going to still have testosterone, this is a chemical problem, testosterone is an actual chemical. But I think like even since this happened to Harvey which is like a few months ago it's already gotten better. That is an astonishing thing, I would never, I would not have bet a penny on that.

ET: Fran, are you a feminist?

FL: I never really thought of myself that way because I never really think of myself as a person who agrees with that many people you know. But you know I would say I certainly, I never really, I mean I have -- I mean I live in the real world, but I mean I've been able to live my life paying the least attention to men that you could possibly pay in that way. Like you know like someone will say did you ever meet him I go I don't know I never remember men you know. I mean so that I -- yes, I mean I'm for girls I always said that. Like I always say when there's like some like, I can't think of her name now, Lena Dunham when she appears in the culture and then there's like people first they love her, then of course they hate her or they're writing a million things about her. And people like ask me about her, what do you think about because she's not that good, I say you know what like this is a TV show for people who are like you know 22 years old. You know if you're asking me, but do you think she's really that great, do you think she's like really that great and I would say do you have any idea really mediocre male talents succeed spectacularly, why are you so intent on making sure that Lena Dunham is a genius. The standard they hold you know girls to, the hatred of someone succeeding that you know hugely when she was so young people, that's just envy. And that's male anger because if there's going to be someone, I'm sure she must be older than 22 now, but you know the anger at someone that young succeeding is much, much more if it's a girl, but it almost never is. They are just as good as the 22-year-old boys who are doing that well and they're probably better because it is harder. You know so basically, I always say I'm on the side of girls.

ET: On the side of girls and on that note, thank you very much Frank Lebowitz, it's been really good talking to you.

FL: You're welcome.

ET: Thanks for coming.

FL: My pleasure.