

Fran Speak...

by Richard Warren

Legendary humorist Fran Lebowitz, known as much for her trademark sneer and omnipresent cigarette as for her biting wit, visits Columbus September 10 to read either from her classic essays on modern life or from her novel-in-progress. "I'm bringing both. I'll decide what I'll read after I size up the audience," the professionally deadpan author commented.

Lebowitz's appearance, part of the Thurber House Evenings with Authors series, will take place at the Columbus School for Girls at 8 p.m.

Lebowitz, a regular on David Letterman's *Late Night*, is the author of two collections of essays, *Metropolitan Life* and *Social Studies*, that have come to be regarded as classics of literary humor and social observation. The essays lampoon today's trends in a manner that could only be described as doggedly politically incorrect.

Proud to have been dismissed from high school for "nonspecific surliness," Lebowitz moved to New York, where she completed her education via her own voracious appetite for reading, surviving by driving taxis and cleaning apartments, "with a small specialty in Venetian blinds." At 21, she furthered her education by writing a column for Andy Warhol's *Interview* magazine, and then leapt to the pages of *Mademoiselle*. Her work from this period forms the basis for the essays in her two books.

In recent years, Lebowitz has found herself stalled in her attempt to write a novel, partially due to a writers block of several years' duration and partially because of a self-proclaimed slothfulness of legendary stature. Recent interviews have revealed Lebowitz as a devotee of lengthy naps and daytime television.

Lebowitz's long hiatus from publishing has been broken with, of all things, a children's book, *Mr. Chas and Lisa Sue Meet the Pandas*, due out in November. It tells the story of two seven-year-olds who befriend two pandas, known as Pandemonium and Don't Panda to Public Taste, who are hiding out in an elegant old apartment building in New York trying to avoid being imprisoned in a zoo. The pandas long for the refinements of city life—movies, museums, nightclubs...pretzels, pizza, chocolate eclairs. The children help smuggle the pandas, dressed as dogs, to Paris where they presumably can find a real city life. "I decided to write a children's book so that children

would have something to read on the plane," Lebowitz said.

Lebowitz spoke to *Columbus Alive!* from her apartment in midtown Manhattan.

Do you think people are going to be surprised to find Fran Lebowitz as the author of a children's book?

Yes, I think they probably will, because people have such a kind of cartoon notion, not only of me, but people they read about in general, because the press is only able to give everyone one trait. And the traits I've been identified with are not exactly Barney-type traits.

What do you think those traits are that you've been identified with?

Explicitly adult ones. So people might be further surprised when they read the book to discover that it's actually a children's book. It's clear to me already that people are expecting one of those ersatz children's books that are really for adults with kind of a nod to children, but the book is really meant for children. It's not really for 40-year-olds to put on their coffee tables. So I do think they'll be surprised. I don't think they'll be horrified. I'm sure every adult has worse surprises in their life every day than this. Just opening your eyes every morning is a worse surprise.



How do you feel about kids? Do you like them?

Yes, I like them very much, and this is the other thing people are surprised about. Because I don't like animals people think I don't like children. Also, in the early reviews of my first book, I was frequently compared for some reason with W.C. Fields, and since he was very well-known for his remarks in opposition to the whole idea of children, I think people may have that idea about me. I like children very much. In fact, I frequently prefer them to adults. They're almost invariably less annoying. I don't have children, either, which probably helps me to maintain my affection for them. Think about it—children have all these attractive qualities. All their unattractive qualities are their parents' problem. I have no responsibility for children. I see children, I visit them. It's nicer to visit them—you can leave. It's like being a

grandmother your whole life. It's all the up side.

I especially like to listen to children because they have no preconceived notions, so they are quite entertaining. That's why people are always telling you things their children say, but they never tell you what their husband said. Their husbands are saying the same things all the other husbands are saying, but children are different from one another. They haven't learned to agree yet. So it's very common for people to say "Do you know what my three-year-old said?" No one ever says "Do you know what my 38-year-old said?" No one ever says that.

"I've invented a novel that is so hard to write I often think I'm not the one to write it. I had the idea for it, but I can't do it."

Where did you get the idea of writing a children's book?

I'd always wanted to write a children's book. I always had it in my mind, and I guess at some point I probably said to myself "Well, you're 43. When will you write it? Will you wait till you're 63? Or 93?" I had several years of not being able to write at all, but then that stopped and I started working on my novel quite a bit. I had even extra writing energy so when I was stuck on my novel I would transfer to the children's book so I'd at least still be writing because I had no trouble at all writing the children's book.

Kind of a way to get over writers' block then?

I wouldn't call it writers' block, just a way to get over being stuck, instead of what I ordinarily do, which is immediately retiring to the sofa with someone else's book. I'd instead work on the kids book since at least I'd be writing. It's closer to writing to write than to read, which is what I usually do.

Did you have a good time writing the children's book?

I found it pleasurable because it wasn't hard. Just from a very pure work point of view it's nowhere near the work my novel is. I've invented a novel that is so hard to write I often think I'm not the one to write it. I had the idea for it, but I can't do it.

I've heard you make charts and bulletin boards mapping out every chapter.

Well, first of all, the novel takes place over 20 years and has about 20 million characters. It's hard, writing is hard, and I'm lazy, and the whole combination is not a good one. I'm working on a second one.

A second children's book?

In my mind, it's meant as a series with these two kids. In the one I'm

working on now the kids actually go to Paris. It's fun for me. It allows me to be childish, which is fun. Men do this by playing baseball. I see grown men all the time playing basketball and that's really a thing for children to do, let's face it. So this is my equivalent—making up stories, which is not what writing a novel is really like. People think it is, but it's not.

What are your expectations of Columbus? What do you think it's going to be like?

I think I was in Columbus once. Is it near Cincinnati? I think there was a time when I was there when I wasn't allowed to go to Cleveland. My memory is that I made a disparaging remark about Cleveland in the newspaper. I was on a book tour and Cleveland was hostile to me, so instead of flying to Cleveland, I went to Cincinnati and Columbus. I have a more vivid memory of Cincinnati because of my discovery of their great chili.

Which has now been transported to Columbus.

So there's another good reason to come there. I remember Cincinnati because I remember thinking "Why didn't anyone else think to put it with spaghetti! What a good idea!" I do think I was in Columbus. I don't remember it very vividly I have to say. I was on a 21-city book tour, and so if they didn't have some special kind of chili, I wouldn't remember the place.

I just had some very bad news in my opinion, which is that the whole reason I agreed to come to Columbus was because I was going to be able to sleep in James Thurber's bed. This was something I was really looking forward to, imagining that his productivity would rub off on me. I was just told this morning that although I was welcome to stay there, you can't smoke in that house.



Oh no!

I think that James Thurber himself would be appalled to hear this since he smoked. But I can't stay in a place where you can't smoke, so I will not be sleeping in James Thurber's bed. I will just be looking at it. Sleeping in that bed was their initial offer to me. That's what lured me there to begin with. That's really what I wanted to do, and now I find I can only sleep in his bed if I don't smoke in it. I guess I'm ruled more by my addiction than I am by my admiration for James Thurber. I suppose at some point someone will be invited to sleep in Edward R.

...row's bed but be told they can't smoke. And he was such a famous heavy smoker!

In Columbus, we're having a big battle about banning smoking in public places.

Lots of cities are having these fights. The whole thing is totally ridiculous. We live in a country that encourages everyone to drive their car everywhere. Why don't people worry about car exhaust? One whiff of a 57th Street crosstown bus is a lifetime of smoking. I do think most people think it's harmful. Clearly, that is an absurd notion that someone else's cigarette smoke is harmful to you. It's ridiculous in a country that lives on Hostess Twinkies and drives their cars 24 hours a day to worry about someone else's cigarette smoke. I am sure that smoking cigarettes is harmful to you. I just don't think other people smoking cigarettes is harmful to you. We don't have these bans in New York. We seem to have no laws against murder in New York, so I don't know why we'd have laws against smoking. I really think Columbus must be a more law-abiding environment in general. Here no one obeys any laws. It's Dodge City here. The only laws they enforce are parking laws. So I'm very distraught about not being able to sleep in James Thurber's bed.

"James Thurber is a legitimate great person to come from your town. We would be happy to have him come from New York."

Well, I guess you'll be able to actually see it. And sit on it.

You may be glad when you see it. It doesn't look that comfortable.

I was just hoping it would fall down and inspire me.

I also read a quote from the *Paris Review* last year that you'd rather have lunch with James Thurber than James Joyce. Would you comment on that?

Apparently I said that since people are quoting it. I don't remember saying it. I guess I did. George Plimpton always asks the question "Who would you like to have dinner with", and I think I probably said "No one." I've never particularly had an interest in meeting people just because I admired their work. Often when you do meet people they turn out to be nothing like their work, especially writers. Anyway, I guess Joyce must be a particular favorite of George's, so he asked me if I had to have lunch with someone, wouldn't I like to have lunch with James Joyce, so I probably did say I'd rather have lunch with James Thurber, and I certainly would. Who wouldn't, from a lunch point of view? I also would rather read James Thurber than James Joyce. He is without question the funniest writer. It doesn't matter how

many times you read his things and when you read them last. Even though in lots of ways they're very dated, they are in no profound way dated, because no one who is really good dates, in my opinion. Oh, the references are dated, and even his sensibility is, but his talent is so salient that you laugh. I would defy anyone to read some of those Thurber pieces and not laugh. Even a 20-year old who would really be distant from the time or any references in popular literature to him. I still think that anyone would find him hilarious.

So you're prepared to pay sufficient homage to him? He's practically a patron saint here, the one famous person that's come from this town.

But that's some famous person to come from your town! I've been to towns where some hockey player is from, and every place you go, there are signs and I ask "Who's that?" and they look at you like you're insane. James Thurber is a legitimate great person to come from your town. We would be happy to have him come from New York. I think that he is unquestionably one of the greatest humorists ever to write in English. I don't think there's much contention about that. In this house, there's none.



It sounds then like you won't be delivering any shocking anti-Thurber statements while you're here that will be picked up by our press.

No, I'm a huge Thurber fan.

What do you want to see when you're in Columbus?

I just hope that there is a Columbus. Because to tell you the truth I travel around the country and there are practically no towns left. You think, "I'm in this town, but there's no town there, there's a mall." I don't know whether Columbus is still there, but if there is still a Columbus, I'll be happy to see it. Do you still have a town there?

Well, they're knocking things down left and right, but there's still quite a bit of the city left.

I'm in favor of any town that is still standing in America. I'm pretty sure you could go from one end of the country to the other without ever going outside. You can go right through the mall all the way through the country. I hope I live long enough to see them start knocking the malls down. I'm sure that will come—I just hope I'm around. The country was far more interesting when you would go to a place, and the place would be there. I'm just hoping Columbus is there when I arrive.

I'm sure there will be something here for you to see.

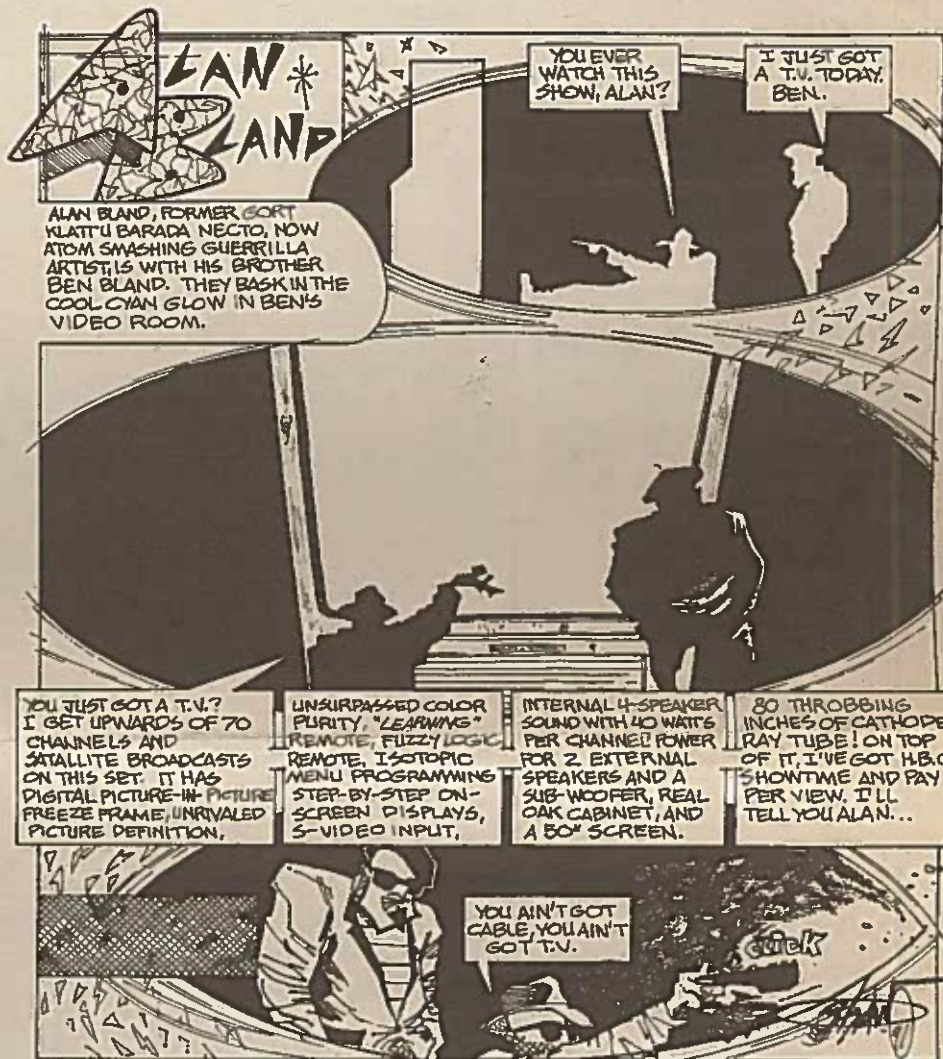
I hope so. And I'm delighted to hear the chili has travelled that far.

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