

Fran Lebowitz laments shift in reading culture, dishes on Scorsese at Rancho Mirage talk

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Fran Lebowitz speaks during a session at the Rancho Mirage Writers Festival at the Rancho Mirage Public Library, February 3, 2023. Jay Calderon/The Desert Sun

Author and social commentator Fran Lebowitz has made her opinions known on a number of topics over the years, and she certainly didn't hold back at the ninth annual Rancho Mirage Writers Festival.

Lebowitz, known for her whip smart and funny remarks about New York City and current events, spoke with Jeffrey Brown, chief arts correspondent for PBS NewsHour, Friday at the Rancho Mirage Library and Observatory. She indulged the crowd with anecdotes about her disdain of travel, her friendship with director Martin Scorsese and insights about her New York City life.

Here are some of the highlights from the session.

Her ambitions in life

Lebowitz grew up in a small town in New Jersey and enjoyed her childhood, but around the age of 11 or 12, she realized it wasn't the place for her.

She and her family often visited New York and went to museums. Her goal from early on was to move to the city, although she imagined she would live in the Museum of Modern Art. Though she doesn't live in the museum, it is 20 blocks away from her home.

"It's very important to me to live in a place like that," she said.

Even with all of its problems, there's nowhere else she'd rather live than New York. She still rides the subway, she told one audience member, and said the crime today "is nothing compared to what it was in the '70s." She does admit that she has never touched a single thing on the subway due to her germaphobia, and couldn't believe her eyes when she saw a child drop their pacifier on the ground, their mother brush it off slightly and put it back in the child's mouth.

"I thought, either that child's going to drop dead right now, or that child will live to be 400 years old because it now has an immunity to every disease," she said, adding that she would not rescue the Hope Diamond if she dropped it on the subway floor.

Another ambition was to become a writer, which came from her early love of reading. She went to the library frequently, but didn't realize until she was 7 that people wrote books, which she described as a "godly act." Before then, she thought they were "just there like trees."

She wrote for a small magazine called Changes, and was later hired by artist Andy Warhol as a columnist for Interview magazine. Lebowitz has written two books, "Metropolitan Life" (1978) and "Social Studies" (1981).



Fran Lebowitz and Jeffrey Brown have a discussion at the Rancho Mirage Writers Festival at the Rancho Mirage Public Library, February 3, 2023. *Jay Calderon/The Desert Sun*

On today's literary culture

Over time, she noted there's been a noticeable shift in what people read.

"People have been taught to care about whether they see themselves in a book, which I think is absolutely the opposite of the point of reading," she said.

When she was a child, she loved the popular book "Heidi" about a young Swiss girl who lives in the Alps with her grandfather, she explained.

"I was obsessed with this book, but I never once thought, 'Why am I not a little Swiss girl? Why is my grandfather not a goat herder?'" Lebowitz said. "A book is not a mirror; a book should be a window." The crowd gave her a round of applause.

The author believes TV host Oprah Winfrey influenced this shift in what books people are choosing to read. Though Lebowitz credits Winfrey for "doing a great thing" and getting people to read, "she got people to read in the way I guess she thought of reading, which is, 'I love this book because I saw myself in this book.'"

"I don't think it's important to see yourself in a book. It's important, I suppose, to not feel like you could never be in a book," noting that the detective "Nancy Drew" series was popular among young girls growing up because "there were almost no girls in books when I was a girl."

She also quoted her late friend, novelist Toni Morrison, who said, "I wrote my first novel because I wanted to read it."

"That's very different from, 'I wrote a book to see myself,'" Lebowitz added. "It's better people read than don't read, but it's better if you would read with an idea that the book is going to take you away, not put you back."



The crowd laughs as Fran Lebowitz speaks at the Rancho Mirage Writers Festival at the Rancho Mirage Public Library, February 13, 2023. *Jay Calderon/The Desert Sun*

Friendship with Scorsese

Though Lebowitz can't exactly remember how she met Scorsese — she believes it was at a party in the 1980s — she "just loves him." He's even one of the most well-read people she's ever met in her life.

The two have collaborated over the years in film. He made the documentary, "Public Speaking," about her various speaking engagements, and they later worked on a Netflix series, "Pretend It's a City," in which he interviews her about a number of subjects. Lebowitz also made an appearance as a judge in Scorsese's 2013 film "The Wolf of Wall Street."

"I'm very easy to find: I'm the only woman wearing clothes," she said of the Oscar-nominated film.

The docuseries "Pretend It's a City" "tremendously" changed her life, she said, because of Netflix's global reach. Since its release in 2021, she has been invited to speak in several European countries.

On flying

Lebowitz usually starts her day by taking in news. On Friday, she watched a news program discussing a Chinese surveillance balloon drifting over the U.S. But she believes the balloon is actually a Delta airlines flight.

"I think it is my flight from six months ago that was supposed to get me from Seattle to Denver, and it just took off," the author said. "I am more worried about Delta than the Chinese government. I never have to do anything with the Chinese government, but unfortunately sometimes I do have to fly Delta."

Her speaking gigs force her to travel frequently, and "getting places is really horrible," in her opinion. It often brings out her inner rage because she doesn't have a cellphone unlike most other people. It doesn't matter where people are, or if they're stuck at an airport, "they're still on the phone, which is a kind of place," she said.



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She also said the airline industry is run like no other business in the world.

"You're sitting on the plane and you've been sitting on the ground for like four hours, and the pilot says, 'Thank you for your patience.' We are not patient, we are hostages," she said, met with laughter from the crowd. "If we were waiting this long for something else, we'd walk out, but we can't leave this place."

Why she doesn't have technology

Lebowitz is known for not using a cellphone and various other devices. When Brown asked why she doesn't get one, Lebowitz said "because someone has to pay attention to what's going on," which includes her fellow humans and their bad habits.

When she observes what people are doing on their phones on the subway, she estimated that 90% of the time adults are playing games. "How is that the best use of your time?" she wondered. "And how's it even interesting?"

Many of her friends are also angry at her anti-technology habits because they can't get in contact with her easily.

"So what? Who am I?" she said. "I'm not like the head of emergency brain surgery at New York Hospital. You don't need to reach me, I can't do anything."