

Saturday

# 'I've had one hell of a life and I'm not finished yet...'



Irma Kurtz and son Marc.

She has been an agony aunt for 40 years and at the age of 80, shows no signs of slowing down her famously Bohemian lifestyle. Ahead of her visit to Guernsey to speak at the annual Guernsey Literary Festival, Irma Kurtz talks to **Jill Chadwick** about a life not lived in agony

**A**GONY aunt Irma Kurtz is nursing a hangover but gamely she agrees to be interviewed from her French bolthole where, she says, for once she imbibed too much local wine with some visiting friends and is now paying the price. 'I don't drink very much as a rule, so I'm suffering a bit today, but it was fun...' Irma is a feisty, fun-loving American journalist turned writer who shows no sign of slowing down, despite hitting 80 in a couple of weeks' time. 'Age does not bother me in the slightest,' she says. 'I continue to live a full and eventful life, dividing my time between what my son Marc calls my mouse holes: a studio apartment in London and this small place which I love on the Channel side of the French coast. 'The French tax you if you have a sea view but I don't really have one as such - it's more of a squint.' Irma loves the French way of life, though she says that while the wine continues to be very pleasant, she has found the cuisine has dipped in recent years. 'Everyone says so, even my French friends here will admit to it. We were walking past one of the restaurants yesterday and we saw bags of frozen vegetables outside the door. Things are not what they were.' In her idyllic little French bolthole in Wimereux, not far from Calais, she has few friends. 'It is not easy to make friends with the French. I have managed to find a

few though, which keeps life interesting.' Small and sparkly, Irma has the energy and drive of a woman half her age. She is happy to look back on a life that has encountered many ups and downs and has given her an insight to all manner of good and bad experiences.

'That is perhaps one of the reasons why becoming an agony aunt was easy for me and something I could do well. I have moved around all my life and have learned a lot of lessons along the way. At one point I was a journalist and decided that I should see first-hand the war zone in Vietnam, which just goes to show what a silly cow I was.'

She grew up in New Jersey - 'if I stood on a chair I could see the Statue of Liberty' - though once she discovered she could get to Manhattan for a nickel she spent all her time in the West Village, listening to the poets and enjoying her first taste of life as a Bohemian.

When she was born the birth notice almost underlined her parents' disappointment that she was a girl. 'They wanted a boy, it was as simple as that. In those days everyone wanted a boy first. Luckily my brother came along a few years later and they were delighted, and so was I because the pressure was off. It gave me the freedom to explore and get away as much as I wanted to. 'I loved the Bohemian way of life and still do. I went to Colombia University and studied English Literature and I toyed

with the idea of a career as an actress, as I was involved in the amateur dramatics scene and was told I had talent. But it would have meant leaving university and my studies and I would not do that. The decision was the right one.' She talks of her time spent as a ship's cook on a boat in Ibiza, a time she says she lived life to the full. 'When I lived in Ibiza there was only one boat a week from Barcelona and you could only reach the best beaches by sailboat. I went back there a few years ago and cried at how awful it has become. The island bears no resemblance to how it was. In fact the whole of the Med has turned into an awful warm bath.'

**'Agony aunts are a bit like white witches at the bottom of the lane. We are not shrinks, but people do feel able to talk to us and we feel able to help them'**

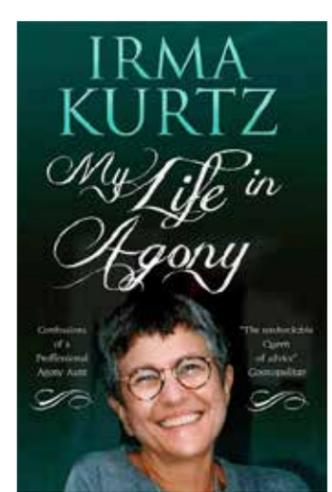
interview



'American women really expect happiness as their right... whereas British women would write in and ask me what they had done that was so wrong'



Picture by B White



**GUERNSEY LITERARY FESTIVAL**

Irma Kurtz: My Life in Agony is on Friday 18 September at the Town Church, starting at 1.15pm. More from [guernseyliteraryfestival.com](http://guernseyliteraryfestival.com)

She went on to enjoy an adventurous time in Paris for a couple of years, where she was drawn to the West Bank, another Bohemian area people like Irma were drawn to. 'Paris is not a warm city though, and it's not the easiest place to live. But many things there have changed and Bohemian areas of the Rive Gauche no longer exist, so I moved on. I had waited on tables at home to afford to move to Europe so there was no way I was going home to a chorus of "I told you so". Instead I decided to come to Britain and give it a go.' She says that in Britain she found life immediately better. She found interesting work and ended up working on a magazine for the Raymond Revue Bar empire. 'I was working in PR in an agency in Fleet Street at the time and he was a client and it just sort of happened.'

She lived life to the full in the swinging '60s in London, fell in love with an artist and fell pregnant with her son. 'I realised then that living a Bohemian, chaotic lifestyle was not going to work with having a baby - I needed some stability', she says. Along the way, though not formally trained in psychology, Irma showed an ability to empathise with people's problems and she became an agony aunt. 'I worked for Cosmo all over the world and every time they launched a new title in another country, I would work as the columnist for the first year or two

until they found someone.' She worked across five countries and found that most problems did travel. Her latest book, My Life in Agony is based on her many experiences. 'Problems are problems wherever you go and I have been writing about agony for decades. There is a difference, though, with the way people present problems in different cultures. 'American women really expect happiness as their right and take very seriously the pursuit of happiness, whereas British women would write to me and ask me what they had done that was so wrong.' She has listened to the plight of women (and men) in Japan, South Africa and the US and over the years has received millions of letters. 'I have opened and read every single one of them. Of course the internet took over, but I so preferred getting handwritten letters because it was easier to see the emotion in them. There would be parts crossed out and if you held the letter up to the light you could see the painful bits they had tried to hide from you. Many were tear-stained and many were raw. I became a bit of an amateur graphologist - I would be able to suss out what was going on in their lives. Nowadays the letters come to you via email and it is not so easy.' While Irma is no longer an official agony aunt she says that people still seem drawn to her to discuss their problems. 'When I was travelling here from the UK I could just tell that a woman I had seen

was going to come to talk to me about a problem and sure enough, she did. Often perfect strangers will come up to me in the street and talk to me. Agony aunts are a bit like white witches at the bottom of the lane. We are not shrinks, but people do feel able to talk to us and we feel able to help them.' She agrees that it is often much easier to share your troubles with a stranger. 'For one thing you're not going to gossip to anyone about their problems or repeat them to anyone else. For 40 years I have enjoyed my role and I have learned so much along the way, but a lot of what I do is rely on a deep intuition.'

Irma never married and says she enjoyed bringing up her son as a single parent. 'I split up amicably from his father when he was a baby in arms; it was easier to do it then. His father is a painter and a Bohemian and they live by their egos, but he remained in Marc's life and we do talk, he is still a friend. There was no way I was going to separate a father from his son but our relationship had to end, and I did it when my son was a baby as that was the easiest time.' Eventually she sold her house and bought a studio in Soho so that her son could go to a boarding school he liked in Dorset. 'He had gone to see it and caught the eye of a young lady, I believe, but he loved it there and got a great education.' He is now married with four children and Irma loves meeting up with them all.

'They are in Majorca right now, but you cannot begin to know what tired is unless you have spent a few days with them. They are lovely, but so lively. They have an older son and triplets - twin girls, another boy. A lot of hard work.' She swapped her Soho studio for another in Gray's Inn a few years ago because, she says, one day she walked out of the door and realised Soho had moved on. 'It was no longer the Bohemian centre it had been - that has moved to Shoreditch they tell me. Similarly, in New York, Bohemia Centro has moved from Manhattan to Brooklyn. Irma continues to write and says at some point soon she may finally get around to writing her memoirs in full. 'I do mean to get around to it. My latest book is not a masterpiece, it is what it is. I talk about being an agony aunt and why I feel able to give the advice I do. To be quite honest with you I have never had the most self-confidence, I have always been able to relate and be sympathetic to the women who have written to me about that. But I've had one hell of a life and I'm not finished yet.' She says it would be hard to pick out the best advice she has ever given. 'There is one thing I would like to share though. I hate the word "should". If someone says that they feel they should do something it usually means that they shouldn't. Should is not a good word. 'But having said that, I should stop letting friends lead me astray. Hangovers get trickier the older you get...'