

“It’s what I wanted my entire life. People asking me my opinion, and people not allowed to interrupt.”—Fran Lebowitz in *Public Speaking*

“There are some great writers who are great talkers, but there are more great writers who are not great talkers. People seem to think there is some connection between talking and writing, but I love to talk and if there were some connection between the two of them I would be the most prolific writer in the history of the world.”—Fran Lebowitz to *The Paris Review*



A Visions and Voices Signature Event

Tuesday, March 2, 2021, at 5 p.m. PT

Live via Zoom

University of Southern California

WHAT TO KNOW

- Fran Lebowitz is an author, journalist, humorist, and social commentator who has been active since the 1970s.
- She is the author of the best sellers *Metropolitan Life* (1978) and *Social Studies* (1981), and in recent decades is known more as a speaker than as a writer.
- Lebowitz is the star of *Pretend It’s a City*, a new Netflix documentary series directed by Martin Scorsese.
- The discussion will be moderated by USC Annenberg professor Josh Kun.

ABOUT FRAN LEBOWITZ

Fran Lebowitz was born in New Jersey in 1950, to parents who owned a furniture store and upholstery workshop. After earning a GED (she was expelled from high school), she moved to New York City in 1969 and has been associated with New York ever since. (“I feel that I am like the designated New Yorker,” she told *The New Yorker* last year.)

As a young adult in New York, Lebowitz worked a variety of jobs—among them cleaning apartments and driving a cab—before landing journalism gigs with Andy Warhol’s *Interview* magazine, where she was a columnist, and *Mademoiselle*. Her writings in these publications formed the basis for her first book, *Metropolitan Life*, published in 1978. The book made her famous, and she became a regular on TV and at legendary hot spots like Studio 54. Another book of essays, *Social Studies*, followed in 1981.

In 1987, Lebowitz wrote a powerful piece in the *New York Times* on “The Impact of AIDS on the Artistic Community,” documenting in real time the devastation she would later reflect back on with the words, “AIDS completely changed American culture.”

Lebowitz’s writer’s block is legendary. She was known as a writer for the books she published in 1978 and 1981. In the decades since, she has made an impact primarily as a speaker—she is “one of our preeminent extemporaneous talkers,” wrote Robert Marston in *Inside Hook*. Indeed, Martin Scorsese’s 2010 documentary about Lebowitz was called *Public Speaking*.

Lebowitz has been called a modern-day Dorothy Parker, and is known for both her wit and her trademark fashion: suit jackets, jeans, cowboy boots, and tortoiseshell glasses. She is also known for her aversion to new technology: she doesn’t have a computer or a cell phone. What she does have is books: her book collection famously numbers more than 10,000.

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

- What do you think are the differences between speaking and writing?
- In a recent interview in *The New Yorker*, Lebowitz said, “Not only are you not always right—when you are wrong, you are the worst wrong you can possibly be.” How does this resonate with you? What do you think it says about opinions? About self-knowledge?
- Lebowitz reflects a lot on how New York has changed over the past half century. Have you seen a city change like that? What do you think drives such changes?

IF YOU LIKED THIS EVENT, YOU MIGHT WANT TO CHECK OUT:

- Pretend It’s A City* and *Public Speaking* | [On Netflix](#)
- Street views of 1980s New York | [80s.nyc](#)
- Interview magazine | [interviewmagazine.com](#)
- ACT UP Oral History Project | [actuporalhistory.org](#)

DISCOVER MORE AT THE USC LIBRARIES

CHRISTY KANE of the USC Libraries selected the following resources to help you learn more about this evening’s event. Electronic resources are accessible through the search bar on the USC Libraries homepage at [libraries.usc.edu](#) but may require the user to log in using their USC credentials.

BOOKS

- Fran Lebowitz, *Social Studies* (New York: Random House, 1981).
- Fran Lebowitz, *Metropolitan Life* (New York: Dutton, 1978).
- Fran Lebowitz, *The Fran Lebowitz Reader* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994).

ARTICLES

- Brian Allesandro, “[I’m Not an Assassin!»: Fran Lebowitz on Not Sleeping, Not Writing and Not Naming Names.](#)” *Interview*, January 19, 2021.
- Lane Florsheim, “[Fran Lebowitz Hates Wearing a Mask More Than You Do.](#)” *Wall Street Journal*, January 25, 2021.
- Michael Shulman, “[Fran Lebowitz is Never Leaving New York.](#)” *New Yorker*, April 9, 2020.

JOURNALS

- [Interview](#)
- [New York Times](#)
- [Vanity Fair](#)

DATABASES

- [Gateway to North America: The People, Places, and Organizations of 19th-Century New York](#)
- [Jewish Life in America, ca. 1654–1954](#)

Lebowitz cites James Baldwin as a significant influence: “James Baldwin was the first person I ever saw on television who I heard talk like that—by which I mean, he was the first intellectual I ever heard talk . . . And I was just flabbergasted. That made me read him,” she told *Inside Hook*

“New York was always more expensive than any other place in the United States, but you could live in New York . . . We didn’t live *well*. We lived in these horrible places. But you could live in New York. And you didn’t have to think about money every second. First of all, there were a zillion bad jobs. That doesn’t exist any more. I mean, I could wake up one afternoon with zero money—I don’t just mean in the house, I mean to my name—and know that by the end of the day, I would have money.”—Fran Lebowitz in *Interview*, 2016

