The Edinburgh International Book Festival – Irma Kurtz: My Life in Agony

In the end it's all about love, or at least that's what **Irma Kurtz** says, and she should know.

Irma has been *Cosmopolitan UK's* agony aunt for over forty years. She used to get long letters written on tear-stained paper; now it's emails wanting a quick fix, 'the pill for the heartache.' The issues, though, remain largely the same: jealousy, self-esteem – and love, or more often the lack of it.

Irma is here to discuss her new book, *My Life in Agony*, with EIBF Programme Director Janet Smyth. The queue for the session is long and consists predominantly of women of a certain age, though there are a few men too, and good for them. Some of us have been with *Cosmo* as long as Irma; others may not have read the magazine (which has, it must be said, changed quite a bit since the 1980s) for years, but we all still feel we know her. Janet Smyth says she had 'a hiccup of excitement' when she knew Irma was coming to Edinburgh – and there is a definite frisson of anticipation in the audience.

When Irma comes onto the stage she is just as we expect and hope; tiny, vibrant, funny, fast–thinking – and very modest. Unlike some of her peers in journalism, she's neither bossy nor patronising. Why, asks Janet, has she decided to write the book now? The 'inner voice' told her that this was the right time: Irma's a great believer in instinct -and she wanted to get *My Life in Agony* out 'while people still read hard copy.'

The book features an ongoing conversation between common sense and reason: common sense, says Irma, isn't wisdom, but it is one of the stepping stones to growing wise. She thinks of agony aunts as 'white witches…descended from the old lady at the bottom of the lane. She doesn't graduate from a school of thought, she goes on thinking.' Agony aunts are often solitary women, women who spend their time observing people, though Irma says it's nonsense to think that they have to have suffered every problem before they can give good advice, 'We'd never survive.'

The book is not a full autobiography – the curtain, observes Janet, is 'only opened a chink' on Irma's own life, concentrating more on her career at *Cosmo* and reflecting on why people bring their problems to her. We do learn, however, that she left the US because 'I didn't like the destiny laid out for me – the lawyer in Connecticut with two cars in the driveway is not for me.' We need, she says, to be honest with ourselves if we want to move forward and find happiness. 'The great lies begin at home….honesty is always hard, but it's worth it.' She'd fallen in love with Paris on a school trip; after college she waitressed for two years to save the money to return, 'I bought my freedom.' But Paris was a disappointment: it wasn't Bohemian any more – Irma's heart was broken for the first time, not by a lover but a city. She moved to London where 'if the Bohemian scene moves, it moves elsewhere', and although she's worked all over the world, London has been her home ever since. Even so, she acknowledges that the more money rules the capital, the harder Bohemia is to find. 'These days art is based on sales, not beauty.'

Irma has had many love affairs since that first one with Paris, but she remains resolutely single. She lived on a boat with a Scot, the relationship finally floundering because she needed the city too much. She had a long friendship with Jeffrey Bernard and may or may not have had a one-afternoon fling with him years earlier. Before working for *Cosmo* (and

before that *Nova*) she was what she calls a ‘real’ journalist and is ashamed to admit that she wanted to see a war zone. Qantas gave her a free first class ticket to Vietnam – ‘I was like the women who used to lift their skirts to visit Bedlam. I learned a lot.’

But then at the age of 36 Irma decided she wanted a baby ‘I knew I had to have a child and I knew I’d be good at it.’ So she left ‘serious’ journalism and started on the career she still has today. Her son is now in his forties, married with four children including triplets: Irma refers to them often and is clearly as besotted as any grandma would be. Many of her feminist friends from the 70s chose not to have children, a decision that she entirely respects. Everyone, she says, must make her own choice – but when she gets letters today from young women who say they don’t want children, her reply is always ‘that’s a door you don’t slam.’ It is still hard, she says, for women to ‘have it all’ *(Cosmo’s* famous byline back in the day) because women are still the only ones who can have babies. Society, she says, still judges women for choosing to remain childless ‘they’ve decided not to use the plumbing’, but she hopes that new generations will be less harsh.

So what do people write to Irma about? And have the issues changed over the years? Well yes and no: it’s still all about love, self-esteem and sexual jealousy, but she used to learn a lot from people’s handwriting: emails have changed that. Those tear-stained letters often came with some parts scribbled out, she would hold them up to the light to see what was underneath. She also feels that writing things down is hugely beneficial, a benefit that’s been lost: she used to receive ten page letters ending ‘I feel better now I’ve put it all on paper.’ She would not consult an agony aunt herself, although she does talk to good friends (‘they’re sick of it!’) and she places great importance on keeping a journal, ‘I write to myself.’

Nowadays Irma often doesn't even know where the writer is living, and although most problems are the same the world over, cultural and religious context can be important. She worked briefly for *Cosmo* in Australia, the US, Japan and South Africa – the latter was especially difficult as the apartheid regime meant that some agencies were only open to whites or blacks, not both. In Japan she found that women were rarely outspoken about love and were much more likely to wax vocal about their mothers-in-law, whilst men wrote agonising about their work status. In the UK she often hears from second generation immigrants, 'inflexible customs cause heartache in all societies.'

Many people now take part in online dating; 'I'm in love with someone that I've never met' is a line Irma hears from young women – and some men. She urges caution and meeting in a safe place, 'It's impossible to fall in love with someone you've never smelled.' Another social change is the rise in loneliness; families are far flung, people work longer hours and live longer lives. Sexual jealousy remains an issue but nowadays, says Irma, women think they aren't *supposed* to be jealous and are surprised when they are. 'Friendship with benefits' is a term she abhors, 'It doesn't work any more than communal living worked for hippies in the 60s.'

People talk to Irma; they always have. She sees this as another advantage of being solitary; people feel safe talking to a woman alone. On trains, in cinemas – people share their confidences with her all the time, and it's not hard to see why; I'd love to chat to her myself. She has a word of warning though; 'On trains, don't start too early' – she has a 5 hour journey back to London this afternoon, so I imagine there'll be no eye contact until she's safely south of Peterborough.

Where, asks someone, do men take their problems? There are few agony uncles – Irma has found that men interested in this area tend to become counsellors, 'they need a framework.' She fears that men tend to internalise their problems; they also do not

‘do’ gossip, which educates women about the way things work. In traditional Jewish society women met, talked and arranged marriages in the ‘kitchen court.’ Men, she says, ‘are more interested in the football scores; they fear feelings and need to turn them into actions. Retirement is becoming a serious issue for men.’

Agony aunts in print don’t get too much feedback, although Irma once received a death threat just for mentioning abortion. There’s a two month delay between the receipt of a letter and the printing of her reply, and she’s not supposed to allow queue-jumping, ‘though it’s tear-making, so sometimes I do.’ Online aunts are a different matter, getting so much feedback that she thinks they risk losing sight of the initial problem. For Irma though, ‘feedback is rare but generally delightful.’

Unsurprisingly, Irma has always been a feminist; modern feminists are, she says, working for more basic freedoms, in the workplace in particular, and are also getting men involved, The feminists of the 80s could, she admits, be a little dictatorial at times. ‘It’s better now.’

Does Irma have a message? She doesn’t like to use ‘should’ or ‘ought to’, but says ‘We are born to the world and it’s ours to make something of. It’s so important for our daughters to know that at last the world belongs to women too.’ At its height, *Cosmo* showed women that they could do anything – and at the core of *Cosmo* was and still is Irma Kurtz. Forty years on, the ‘professional ear with a big mouth’ (her words) is still listening, women are still talking, and it’s still all about love.