

A Conversation with
Amy Dickinson
author of
THE MIGHTY QUEENS OF FREEVILLE
A Mother, a Daughter, and the People Who Raised Them

Published by Hyperion in February 2009
ISBN-13: 978-1-4013-2285-4

Q: What is Freeville, and who are its Mighty Queens?

A: Freeville is my dinky hometown in the Finger Lakes district of upstate New York (pop. 458). My family has lived in Freeville since 1790, and my brother, sisters, and I grew up on an ever-failing dairy farm on the outskirts of the village. Growing up in Freeville gave me an intense sense of connection—with the rolling hills and rural landscape of my childhood, but especially with the people who populated my world.

My daughter, Emily, invented the phrase, “The Mighty Queens,” to describe our family, which is abnormally weighted down by women. My three aunts, two sisters, mother, and numerous cousins all live in Freeville, and Emily and I have come to think of them as grand matriarchs, life-advisors, and all-around good company. We have been so fortunate to have three generations of women in our close circle.

I think a lot of us have Mighty Queens in our lives—these are the women who prop us up, give us an occasional dose of reality when we need it, talk over our choices in curtains, diets, and men, teach us how to roll out a pie crust or angle for a promotion, and hand us a Kleenex when we cry.

Q: Why do you think Freeville keeps calling you back?

A: Let me quote my cousin, Nancy, who was standing in my living room looking out onto the traffic rumbling down Main Street during a particularly cold and snowy January day. “I wish we weren’t from here,” she said. “I wish we were from somewhere sunny and attractive. Somewhere like Phoenix.”

“But we are from here, and here is where we’ll stay,” I said, repeating the family mantra. Though I’ve lived in London, Washington, DC, New York City, and Chicago, for me all roads lead back to Freeville. And the reason is simple. I keep returning because it’s my home. My hometown is where I feel most like myself. Sitting on my mother’s porch,

surrounded by family, I feel known. Time slows to a crawl. Sometimes it actually seems to flow backwards. Emily and I admire our neighbors' flowers and produce, ride our bikes, eat the locally famous chicken barbeque, talk, scheme, and dream.

Q: Much of your career has focused on exploring other people's lives. What made you decide to write about your own?

A: I've always been intensely curious about people and drawn to stories that explore the reality of people's lives. One of the pleasures of being an advice columnist is that I'm granted little glimpses into the human condition. As Emily grew older, I realized that she and I were accumulating our own stories. The book that emerged is really a chronicle of the ups and downs of an ordinary life. I see it as a love story, really. I'm smitten with the little slice of the world I know best—and the people who populate it—and I was eager to describe it.

In the course of writing my own story, I started to uncover the roots of my work as an advice columnist. My point of view (and the confidence to share it) grew, like a seedling, out of the tiny patch I come from.

Q: What was your family's reaction to the news that you had been chosen to replace Ann Landers? How do they feel about you writing a book about them?

A: My family was shocked when I got the big job—too shocked, now that I think of it—and once they got over their shock, they started mocking me. That's how it's done.

I retaliated by writing a book where they pop up as continuing characters, always commenting on the action—like my own personal wise and wise-cracking Greek chorus. They trusted me to be kind and fair and I thanked them for giving me a lifetime of material.

Q: Has giving advice to others made it easier to solve problems in your own life?

A: Very often, when I have a problem, I'll sit down and write myself a virtual "letter." Writing my column has taught me to be more thoughtful in my own actions and a little more fearless in my reactions. I urge my readers to be assertive when it comes to tackling their own problems. I think it's important for all of us to take responsibility for our mistakes. And I try to do everything I might suggest that others do—and once in awhile I get it right.

Q: If you had to distill your most crucial words of wisdom for your daughter, Emily, into one sentence, what would it be?

A: Take a chance. The older I get, the more I realize that my bolder choices are the ones I'm proudest of. I have had some spectacular crash-and-burn failures, but every experience is useful. Sometimes these failures are useful only as the punch line for a story, like the time I left the bathroom with my skirt tucked into my underpants during a date, or the time I asked the man interviewing me for a job if he wanted to go to the movies with me. But I've danced on the edge of appropriate and lived to tell the tale.

Q: Who do you call when *you* are in need of guidance?

A: Whichever Mighty Queen has the bad luck to answer her phone. I also have a dear friend who is a little older, a lot more experienced, and quite a bit wiser than I. She still takes my calls, fortunately. I ask for her opinion, listen carefully to what she says, and will often change direction based on her counsel.

Q: What writers or journalists have influenced you?

A: I've always loved John Updike's essays. I've also been influenced by Ira Glass, who figured out how to tell radio stories in a fresh and intriguing way. I also read a lot of fiction. I reread "The House of Mirth" and "To the Lighthouse" every summer and will blow through just about anything that lands in my lap.

Q: What's your writing routine?

A: The only routine I really have is to start the day extremely early. I usually get up at around 5 a.m. and work on my column in the mornings. I write 7 columns a week, usually 2 a day from Sunday through Wednesday. On Thursday and Fridays I sometimes travel—and that's when I usually try to work on whatever extra project I have going.

Besides the book, I participate regularly in two shows on National Public Radio: "Talk of the Nation" and "Wait Wait, Don't Tell Me." I also try to produce radio stories occasionally—that's a labor of love, really. Just now I'm working on a radio story about an itinerant painter who travels through Upstate New York each summer, painting barns. I saw him painting a barn and once I started talking to him I knew he'd be a wonderful subject for a story.

At night, I hang out with my mother and sisters, my aunts and cousins, and my daughter—and we visit, play games, and drink coffee.

Q: What do you hope readers take away from reading *The Mighty Queens of Freeville*?

A: My life has not turned out the way I thought it would, but when I take a look at all I've experienced, I realize that it has actually turned out *just* the way I hoped it would.

The message I hope to deliver with this book is that we are at our very best when we connect positively with the people in our lives. I want for people to find the “mighty queens” (and kings!) in their lives, to celebrate them, and to engage in these relationships with gratitude and joy—or at the very least, good humor.

Q: What's next for you?

A: My father, a many times-married dairy farmer and itinerant bee keeper, starts every fine day with an expression: “You'd better make hay while the sun shines.” That's what I'm going to do. I'm going to continue writing my advice column and enjoy the rest of my creative and personal life.

To arrange an interview with Amy Dickinson, please contact:

Allison McGeehon, Publicity Manager, Hyperion
212-456-0173 / allison.mcgeehon@abc.com

Pamela Peterson, Publicity Assistant, Hyperion
212-456-0171 / pamela.peterson@abc.com