

FEATURES

Veteran agony aunt Irma Kurtz reveals the key problems at the heart of most romantic relationships

'Women will always worry about the same thing – men'

PHOTO: VICKY ALHADEFF



Irma Kurtz joined *Cosmopolitan* magazine in 1972, thinking it would do for a year or two. Thirty-nine years later, she is still there

IRMA KURTZ greets me as I emerge from the lift outside her tiny central London flat. "I'm sorry," says the veteran *Cosmopolitan* agony aunt, clearly referring to the mess in the corridor caused by the refurbishment of the building. Over a cup of tea in her living room, Kurtz, slim and elegant at 76, apologises for her earlier apology. In fact she says sorry at regular intervals throughout our conversation for her perceived habit of digressing from the point. "I've often said I was born in the state of apology, so I don't need a passport for it," she says.

Kurtz was born and raised in New Jersey but left for France after graduating from Columbia University, having raised the necessary funds by waiting on tables. "The plan, as far as my father was concerned, was that I would marry a doctor and live out in Westchester or some place. But that wasn't me. I got caught up in the bohemian thing. After a student trip to Paris I knew I had to live there. My father didn't think you spent good money on educating a woman. But I was smart and independent – more than I knew, in fact."

So Kurtz set off for Paris and her father was mystified. "Why do you want to go there when they all want to come here?" he would say. But I was never interested in the American lifestyle. From a very early age, things about it distressed me – the racism and the tendency to fundamentalism.

France was very different. But like so many first loves it was a short-lived affair for Kurtz. However, while she was there, she had an experience which perhaps (in retrospect at least) demonstrated to her that sorting out people's problems might be something he would be both interested in and good at.

"While I was living in Paris in a cheap little student hotel, there was a German girl on the landing opposite me. One day she knocked on my door, burst into tears and said: 'Can you ever forgive me for what my parents did?' I thought, my lord, what a place I'm in now. This apology is phenomenal and would forgiveness not be equally phenomenal? It was a very interesting experience and I never quite resolved it.

All of which brings her back to her apology habit, which is the subject of a Jewish Community Centre panel discussion to which she will be contributing next week. "If one is as persecuted as the Jews have been, there must be an element of thinking that I deserve this. That's where the apology comes in. We have taken the blame. We accept it. I still do that whenever there is a financial scandal and the central figure is Jewish. I think to myself: 'Couldn't he just be called O'Donnell or something?'"

Dealing with guilt and blame has been Kurtz's stock in trade for many years now. Tired of Paris, she arrived in London when the 1960s party was in full swing and immediately felt at home. She wrote for *Nova*, a new magazine which she feels ultimately folded because it was ahead of its time. "It was a great magazine. By the time it closed I had loads of feelers out there. I was a proper journalist. I went to Vietnam in 1970 and got around, until I decided it was time to have a baby. I was a romantic – I did the bohemian romantic thing. Marriage is a licence – you don't need a licence to love.

Besides, my son's father was an artist and you don't marry them, not if you have your wits about you."

Kurtz certainly had her wits about her. *Cosmopolitan* magazine offered her a job as an agony aunt. Kurtz, with a young child to support, needed regular work, so she accepted. She thought it would be nice for a year or two. Thirty-nine years later, she is still there.

She says the contents of her postbag remains much the same as it was back in the early 1970s. "The thing that women tend to worry about will always be the same – men. The essential problems are still there – a lack of faith in oneself, a lack of strength and terrible sexual jealousy, which is often a sign of lack of self-esteem. Women tend to ask themselves: 'Do I deserve to be loved by this person?' Frequently that's what it's about."

When new editions of *Cosmopolitan* have been launched around the world, Kurtz has been drafted in as agony aunt until a local replacement can be found. And she has noticed some cultural differences. "In Japan, they weren't romantic. All the letters had to do with mothers-in-law and there were a lot about work."

She has also had letters which shocked her. One was a letter from a woman in the US in which she confessed to having murdered someone by pushing him out of a car. Another woman wrote asking for advice on a bone-marrow transplant. Kurtz says: "She was in a position to donate bone marrow which would have saved her sister's life. But her husband had said no, so she did not donate. As a result, her sister would

SNAPSHOT

BORN: New Jersey, 1935

EARLY LIFE: Father a dentist. Grew up in Jersey City. Attended Columbia University, graduating with a degree in English literature. Travelled around Europe and lived for while in Paris before settling in London

CAREER: Wrote for *Nova* magazine before joining *Cosmopolitan* as agony aunt in 1972. She also wrote for the American edition for 10 years. A regular on Radio 4 and has written three self-help books, two novels and three travel books. Made a film in Australia for the Channel 4 series, *Travels with my Camera*. Also wrote and presented a 10-part series for BBC4 called *Mediterranean Tales*.

PERSONAL: She has one son.

not talk to her and had written her out of her life. She wrote in the letter: 'Doesn't my sister understand I have to honour and obey my husband?' That letter made me very angry."

If the contents of her postbag remains broadly similar to how it was in the 1970s, the medium has changed. "I used to get letters. I became a kind of graphologist. I could tell a lot from the handwriting, the choice of stationery. Now it's all emails. Even our agony is losing its individuality. Still, I have noticed in the last year or two that the emails are starting to get longer – they are giving me more information."

Kurtz does not feel that getting older is a problem, despite the fact that her correspondents are 50 years younger than she is. "The one thing you can't have when you are young is wisdom. When I was a young agony aunt I had a lot of common sense but I wasn't wise. Wisdom sees patterns too. To be honest, I've been getting better at it."

She pauses, before adding: "We agony aunts are not therapists or counsellors, we're more related to the white witch – the lady who lives at the bottom of the lane. When I give advice I look at the individual as much as I can. I address all my advice based on the individual rather than on some school of thought. I often think how bored someone who follows a school of thought must be after 20 years of teaching it."

Kurtz suddenly bursts into laughter. "Oh, but listen to me – I'm sorry just wind me up and I waffle."

Who's Sorry Now? An Evening of Apology is on October 11 at North London Tavern, 375 Kilburn High Road, NW6. Tickets from www.jcclondon.org.uk or call 020 7431 9866

ONE PERSON WROTE IN CONFESSING TO A MURDER