

E L L E

M.G. Lord

M.G. Lord spent twelve years as a syndicated political cartoonist—a stint she now describes as a diversion: “It was a train I didn’t expect to take. I never intended to generate popular culture, I intended to comment on it.” She did just that in her recent book, *Forever Barbie: The Unauthorized Biography of a Real Doll* (William Morrow). Lord shifted her focus to writing in 1988 and is currently working on a new book and writing fiction, magazine

articles, and a children’s story (somehow she also manages to study Sanskrit and yoga). For this issue, Lord dissects the burgeoning art of media coaching—therapy for the camera-shy. She is convinced that without the training she received for her *Barbie* publicity tour, she would be a “pathetic, nontelegenic oaf.” She’s not just being self-deprecating: “Without a little bit of grooming,” Lord says, “most people on television would just be packages of tics.”

With the help of a media coach,
M.G. Lord learns how
to be effective on TV by disguising
her true personality.
Hey, it worked for Bob Dole!

I’M READY FOR MY CLOSE-UP, MISS WINFREY

In the late ’80s, when Roger Ailes transformed George Bush from an oafish speaker into a merely wooden one, media coaches were a novelty. Today, everyone has them: politicians, authors, executives, anyone who has to confront the press. In California, even fishermen are media-trained; the state’s Seafood Council found that real seafarers could best convince shoppers that their catch was fresh. When Newt Gingrich’s mother whispered a slur into the ear of Connie Chung last winter, insiders wondered why she hadn’t been coached to withstand the wiles of a cunning interviewer.

“TV is an art form, like haiku,” says author Camille Paglia, who was mentored by broadcaster Bill Boggs. “When I went on the Dick Cavett show the first time, I was like a wild animal—I looked like a creature from outer space.” Thanks to Boggs, she began to look less like an angry extraterrestrial. “Television makes authors realize how much bigger the world is than their small circle,” Paglia says. “Media trainers are guides to help you interface—I hate to use that horrible word—with the world at large.”

I view coaches less as guides than as miracle workers. Before my publisher, William Morrow, sent me on the road last year to promote *Forever Barbie: The*

Unauthorized Biography of a Real Doll, it paid \$1,500 for four hours with top trainer Joyce Newman, who has polished Caroline Kennedy, Fabio, even Jeffrey Dahmer’s father. (Trainers are discreet about their clients, so one must rely on leaks to find out who has worked with whom.) Morrow had no plans to place a schlumpy, myopic actual author on tour; Newman’s job was to invent the stylish, persuasive person who should have written the book.

Morrow’s decision to rein in my unembellished self wasn’t exactly withholding a diamond in the rough. In 1981, I forgot my name on the *Today* show. In a segment that gave me nightmares for years, Jane Pauley asked me what my initials stood for and I couldn’t remember. So, with a fresh *Today* booking looming on my schedule, I let Newman go to work.

Her first move was to purge polysyllabic words from my vocabulary—with a look so withering it felt like an electric shock. When I said “neolithic fertility totem,” she substituted “stone-age goddess figure.” “Vestigial,” “misogynistic,” and “veneration” were also banned. “When viewers see a lady intellectual, they change the channel,” Newman explained. Yiddish was off limits as well; *meshugga* as it sounds, a TV audience cannot be assumed to know the meaning of the word *chutzpah*. Next we cobbled out three points for me to >

make—in second-grade language.

Newman's emphasis was on content over style, but after being forced to watch videotapes in which I said "uh" every four seconds, I begged for tips on delivery. There are few swifter routes to humility than being subjected to videos of oneself. Newman wouldn't let me get too depressed. At least my voice wasn't squeaky, grating, or childish, she said. Had it been, she would have sent me first to an otolaryngologist, to rule out a pathological cause, then to a voice therapist, to ensure that in my quest for greater vocal stature I didn't injure my throat. She even liked my hand movements, though to me they looked troublingly like Agnes de Mille's windmill choreography from *Oklahoma!* (Eventually we settled on a Churchillian V for victory, which I held up while mentioning that each second, somewhere in the world two Barbies are sold.)

Finally, there was my appearance. "That hair drags you down," Newman said, bullying me into accompanying her to Frederic Fekkai for an overhaul before my show-down with Connie Chung. Newman is legendary for fussing over image. She's been known to mail clients telegenic neckties, and she bought novelist Gail Godwin a portable steamer so she'd stop worrying about wrinkled clothes. Under Newman's guidance, I not only got a new hair color but also had a makeup lesson with Monique, a veritable magician whose industrial-strength undereye cover-up has enabled legions of insomniacs to successfully impersonate sleepers. But even though I trusted Newman, she made some suggestions I refused to take. No way would I wear brightly colored anchorperson blazers or submit to a school-of-Martha-Stewart haircut.

After practice at mentally gauging four minutes (the length of the *Today* spot) and deflecting questions designed to elicit libel, my real-life interview with Chung went without a hitch. Well, almost. "The good news is M.G. didn't use any of the big words we discussed," my publicist told Newman. "The bad news is she used others."

I'd thought Newman was a brutal drill sergeant, but I later learned that other coaches are harsher. Bill Parkhurst scares clients into cooperation by forcing them to watch a tape he made called *A Day in American Television*—a clip-fest of shows broadcast in a typical twenty-four-hour period. By the time *Nightline* rolls around, they'll agree to anything.

Of course, an author can shun dumbed-down shows, but that could mean shunning the best-seller list. Parkhurst, who worked with author Peter Kramer on

Listening to Prozac, credits much of the book's success to talk shows. Mere appearances, however, aren't enough. The trick, Parkhurst says, is to convince viewers that one's book "will make a dream come true. If you had a fine book of poetry and went on *Oprah* and talked with some panelists, you probably wouldn't sell many copies. But if *Oprah* said, 'I attribute my weight loss to it,' you'd have a strong chance."

Most authors would probably sell their souls for sales, but there is the occasional holdout. "Maybe it's just rationalizing, but I think there's a difference between someone who seeks media training to create a whole new fake image and someone who is shy of the camera lights and is just looking to get through the utter terror of a book tour," says Susan Faludi, who worked with Marin County coach Nancy Herr before going on the road to promote *Backlash*. Herr's job was to make Faludi's on-air persona more in step with her aggressive prose. "Susan's a very shy person," Herr says. "She told us that when she gets in a group of more than three, she clams up. But she knew and we knew that she had to get these messages out."

Today's media trainers owe a debt to Dorothy Sarnoff, the profession's grande dame. Colleagues speculate that she's well into her eighth decade, though she has the energy of a teenager. Whereas Parkhurst started out as a broadcaster and Newman as a speech therapist, Sarnoff began as an opera singer, reaching the apotheosis of her career warbling "Something Wonderful" as Head Wife opposite Yul Brynner in *The King and I*.

Sarnoff's speech is quaintly laced with '50s advertising jargon. "What we're famous for is our 'foolproof' technique for controlling nervousness," she says. "It's infallible." She has taught this "time-tested" method, called the "Sarnoff Squeeze" (see "Squeeze and Freeze," below), to thousands of clients, including members of the U.S. State Department.

She has worked with authors Gail Sheehy, Danielle Steel, and Susan Cheever and takes credit for convincing Bob Dole in 1979 to stop leaning on his disabled arm, transforming not only his posture but his attitude, to make him, she says without irony, "the pleasant personality we know today." But she believes her most amazing feat was preparing the late Prime Minister of Israel Menachem Begin for Camp David. Because his collars hung off his neck on an earlier U.S. visit, journalists had speculated that he might be ill. So Sarnoff sent her husband out to buy him shirts in the correct size. To this day, Sarnoff feels that >

SQUEEZE AND FREEZE: TWO CURES FOR STAGE FRIGHT

When staffers at the U.S. State Department feel an attack of nerves, they practice the "Sarnoff Squeeze"—or so says Dorothy Sarnoff, the media trainer who taught it to them. Sarnoff, who began life as an opera singer, refined the technique after watching Yul Brynner, her co-star in *The King and I*, push against a wall and grunt before going on stage.

What Brynner actually did was contract his abdominus rectus muscles—what Sarnoff calls the "vital triangle," just below the rib cage. To achieve the Sarnoff effect, inhale through your nose, then exhale through your mouth, making a "sssss" sound. As you hiss, contract the vital triangle muscles. Repeat the process. The clenching, Sarnoff says, prevents the production of noradrenaline and epinephrine, the body's "fear-producing chemicals." She also recommends the technique as an antidote to airsickness, angry rampages, and fear of the dentist.

Although contracting these muscles may indeed have vanquished Brynner's jitters, not all coaches endorse the practice. Some, in fact, don't believe in "controlling" stage fright at all. "The first thing I tell people is to accept and even welcome their bodily reactions—like dry mouth, nervous stomach, and heart palpitations," top trainer Joyce Newman says. "They are the body's way of saying, 'All systems go.'" Newman favors a more psychological approach to gaining confidence, which involves working with videotapes made from real or simulated interviews. "Freeze the video at a point where you really like yourself—where you look and sound really strong," she counsels. "Then carry that picture around in your head. When it's time for the next presentation, re-create that person."—M.G.L.

for women as well as men, properly fitting collars cannot be overemphasized.

"Women don't realize that their necks can be big distractors," she says. "They wear their necks exposed—and Governor [Christine Todd] Whitman is one of them. But a lot of women on TV now wear either mock turtlenecks or scarves, which serve up the face much more attractively."

Politicians first grasped the crucial need for media training in 1960, when a dashing John F. Kennedy debated a less-than-suave Richard M. Nixon. But whereas in TV's pioneer days audiences favored style over substance, today they're concerned with both. "If I had to arbitrarily pick a turning point, it probably coincides with the emergence of Ross Perot and the absolute saturation of talk radio, talk TV, talk everything," says Michael Sheehan, one of Washington's top media trainers, a Yale School of Drama graduate and a former associate producer at the Folger Shakespeare Theater, whose current clients include American Express, Chemical Bank, and the Democratic National Committee. "The most common comeback I hear is: 'People on TV never seem to answer the questions.' You never heard that fourteen years ago."

As anyone who has spent some time on television knows, it's not a "natural" medium; to "be yourself" is to risk looking like a dope. The studio may look like an extension of your living room, but it feels like anything but. "You're sitting in a corner of their airplane hangar on furniture designed for comfort by Torquemada," Sheehan explains. "There's a sheet of light you can't see through and all these people running around—technicians, cameramen—and a video monitor on which you see yourself backward. You get a mike slapped on, and all of a sudden you're supposed to have a conversation."

Or worse, to prepare a meal, in the case of cookbook writers. Today, nearly all important cookbook authors tour—and if they have an off day, they could incinerate the studio. Food publicists Lou and Lisa Ekus teach authors to talk and cook at the same time—no mean accomplishment under any circumstances, but almost impossible if the equipment fails. Lou Ekus is especially proud of one alumna who, minutes before a live show, discovered her Cuisinart was plugged into a dead socket near her feet. As a technician slithered toward her across the floor, she gazed defiantly at the camera. "The host's last

words were, 'Spread your legs and smile,'" Ekus recalls.

Good trainers teach clients to cope with unexpected ordeals. With an author or politician, this usually means figuring out the most hostile questions a journalist could ask, then refining the answers. But sometimes one's worst nightmare is beyond imagination.

The *Today* appearance I'd dreaded was a piece of cake. Getting past prepared sound bites, Katie Couric and I bonded spontaneously when she revealed that she, too, had identified with Barbie's homely sidekick, Midge. But my Waterloo came in Washington, on a show called *Working Woman*. Initially, it seemed to go swimmingly. The host not only had read my book but asked intelligent questions about the early days of feminism. Then it dawned on me that the set was swathed in blue sheets, causing the background to drop out. I glanced at the video monitor to find out why. There, to my horror, was a small image of the two of us—superimposed on the couch behind the coffee table in the Barbie Dream House. □

M.G. Lord's Forever Barbie: The Unauthorized Biography of a Real Doll was recently released in paperback by Avon.