

etry—he cites the Grolier Bookstore (see “Grolier Reincarnated,” November-December 2006, page 30) and the 1960s folk scene in Cambridge as early influences, along with a visit to Conrad Aiken, who was then living on Cape Cod—to painting (which he still pursues), to making movies. “Filmmaking, in the end, was the one thing where I could use all the other arts,” he says. After stints with the Peace Corps in Nigeria—where his interest in filmmaking began as a lark with friends—and as a cab driver in Boston, Nilsson

gained public attention in 1979 with his very first feature film, *Northern Lights*. That low-budget drama, focused on the Non-partisan League, a populist movement that rallied the farmers of North Dakota in 1916, won the Camera d’Or at Cannes. Nilsson was 40. After a fallow period, he released *Heat and Sunlight* in 1988, a portrayal of a faltering love affair that took the Grand Prize at Sundance.

As his films attest, Nilsson—who looks a little bit like a street version of Clint Eastwood—is less interested in art as es-

capism than in art that bears witness, that gives some sense of “the way the world seems to be.” And one inescapable part of that was his brother, a diagnosed paranoid schizophrenic. In the early 1990s, driving through San Francisco’s Tenderloin every day on the way to his editing room, Nilsson couldn’t help but be reminded of his missing brother by the people he saw on the street corners. The district, heavily populated by drug addicts, sex workers, and the generally down and out, is typically described the same way as Nilsson’s

F O L I O

Not Groucho (but Way Funny)

For a long time, Patricia Marx ’75 assumed she “would wake up in the suburbs with three kids and a mother hairdo.” It hasn’t worked out that way. She remains single and childless, lives on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, and writes humorous books, scripts, and magazine pieces, including columns on shopping for the *New Yorker*. Some of her best friends are people she met at the Harvard Lampoon, a group that reinforced her conviction that “being funny is the most important thing, maybe the only thing that matters.”

She has acted on that premise as a writer for the TV shows *Saturday Night Live* and *Rugrats*, a writer of seven screenplays (all sold but none, as yet, produced), and as author of more than a dozen books: children’s books such as *Now Everybody Really Hates Me*, adult titles like *How to Regain Your Virginity* and *You Can Never*

Go Wrong by Lying and Other Solutions to the Moral and Social Dilemmas of Our Time, and collaborations with various other artists and humorists (Roz Chast of the *New Yorker*, for example) on the 1003 series (*1003 Great Things About Teachers...About Getting Older*, etc.). These last make good bathroom reading; “If there were no bathrooms,” Marx explains, “I’d have no career.” And last January, Scribner published her first novel,

Him Her Him Again the End of Him, a hip, funny examination of a woman’s decade-long obsession with Mr. Wrong.

Meanwhile, her *New Yorker* shopping pieces bring a comic slant to the consumer’s sidewalk safari. “For anyone struggling to overcome shopper’s block during the holiday season,” she declared in last year’s Christmas-gift column, “there can be no hope of getting Jesus Christ’s birthday postponed.”

Born in the Philadelphia suburb of Abington, Marx was blessed with two “witty” parents who, she says, “didn’t give me a bedtime or care what I ate.” In a way, her father’s office-supply business explains why she started writing: “There were so many Magic Markers around.” The Marxes—no relation to Groucho or Karl, she insists—were a family of readers, and her dad also played the piano, a fact, she adds, that “instilled in me a great hatred for music.” In general, though, she had “a pretty happy childhood. Now I’m mad at my parents for that—no good material.”

In school, Marx was “that person you hate, the one sitting in the back row making fun of the teacher, who secretly does the extra-credit project.” Yet that strategy got her into Harvard, where she concentrated in social studies, breakfasted daily on eight glasses of Tab, and became one of the first women elected to the Lampoon. “Being the only female around made me a mascot, which, I’m ashamed to say, was fine with me,” she admits. “I don’t think I opened my mouth for four years in college; there were too many funny people and I didn’t think I could utter a line as funny as theirs. But I did write a lot.”

By senior year, in terms of careers, she had “ruled out everything,” and so decamped for King’s College, Cambridge, on a National Science Foundation fellowship (“I was a mistake”). Marx did not complete her doctorate. (“All I have to show for it is a lot of cashmere sweaters,” she says.) In 1979 she returned to New York City to write for *Saturday Night Live*, and has remained in Manhattan since. The city has treated her well; she had the good fortune, for example, to house-sit a six-story mansion on upper Fifth Avenue for 15 years, a place where she led a “Holly Golightly life” and sometimes rollerbladed from room to room.

Now she has moved a few blocks away, and she continues to write and shop. (“These shopping pieces are exhausting,” she says. “You have to walk around so much. The older I get, the more I like to sit down.”) A preference for sitting is one reason she likes writing novels—she’s working on her second one now. “I hate not to complain,” Marx says of *Him Her Him Again the End of Him*, “but it was a joy to write.”

—C.L.

Patricia Marx



Photograph by Robert Adam Mayer

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