

# 'I want to be bad!'

Comedian and writer Helen Lederer talks about her Comedy Women in Print Awards, *Ab Fab*, her raunchy new play and why she needs to let her hair down...

**H**elen Lederer is a woman on a mission. Firstly, to shout loudly with her Comedy Women in Print Awards that women are fantastically witty, and many have books inside us that never get written – so get penning, ladies! But also, to enjoy being 'bad' (it's been a tough four years), to finish her memoir – oh, and to dive into a 'raunchy' play just after her awards on 17 April. A dynamo full of ideas (and funny observations on life), the Welsh comedian and writer, 68 – known for *Happy Families*, *Absolutely Fabulous* (she was dippy Catriona, remember?!), not to mention her books and ability to rock at comedy – tells us more...

You're known as a comedian, but what are

**the Comedy Women in Print awards?**

I wrote a book on the train that I thought was laugh-out-loud funny called *Losing It*. And suddenly, I realised that a prize for witty women writers did not exist, so I decided to launch my own awards. Wit in women is a powerful tool. It makes people happy.

**You say 'women have long been under-represented as drivers of wit'. Great line...**

We've always been there, society just hasn't been comfortable with us having visible roles. I've been a comedian since the Eighties and had my share of rejections. I want to fast-track the witty women that never dreamt of being published. I drive myself nuts with admin, but I'm passionate about it. Meera Syal was given Wittiest Writer of the Year last year – she'll present the award to this year's recipient.

**There are three categories, aren't there?**

Yes. One for published authors – such as Monica Ali, Michelle

Gallen, who made our judges laugh – we all need to laugh! The unpublished authors – that's the dream-come-true section. They get published by Harper Collins – and the runners-up get an MA course worth about £7,000. The third category is short stories – some of those winners are going to appear in *best*, so keep your eyes out.

**Can you tell us about the 'never published before' book winner?**

That'll be revealed on the night, but Rebecca Rogers was last year's winner. There were tears in the room – she squealed and said, 'I can give up my job at the Job Centre now!' It was moving. Her book, *The Purgatory Poisoning*, is so funny. There are a lot of people called 'Dave' in it. It has such an original twist.

**And tell us more about your comedy novel, *Losing It*...**

It's written through the eyes of Millie, a woman not a million miles from me – or your Editor-in-Chief (she won't mind me saying that) – who finds herself in debt, divorced and desperate. She was given the opportunity to get paid to take a herbal diet pill, but had to lose weight within a certain timeframe – so the stakes were high. I just wanted somebody to laugh on the Tube, reading it. And somebody reported they had!

**Didn't it get nominated for an award?**

Yes! The PG Wodehouse Literary Comedy Award – great prize, but not just for women. It was the first time



## The birds and the bees!

Helen is embarking on a UK tour of theatrical romp, *The Birds and The Bees*, the morning after her book awards. 'I'm starring alongside Michael Starke – the guy that played Sinbad in *Brookside!*', she says. 'We're two people finding love second time round. It's... possibly a bit raunchy. Typical me – I can't do an ordinary play, can I?! But look, how long have I got left? If opportunities come my way, I must leap on them. At a certain age, you just want to let it all out.'



Helen and Michael star in a raunchy new play

I'm a slightly more genteel version of Miriam Margolyes.' The tour kicks off in Guildford on 10 May. For dates and tickets, see [thebirdsandthebeesplay.com](http://thebirdsandthebeesplay.com)

I was nominated for anything. It gave me the idea of creating an awards ceremony just for women. Then the author Marian Keyes offered her support back in 2018 – it was a game-changer.

**We need laughter more than ever...**

Yes, and since Covid people have been buying more books, been drawn more to wit. It's a no-brainer to have a platform to celebrate it. But growing up as a stand-up, when there were few women doing it, I remember feeling that I wasn't seen as normal – that I was alarming.

**In what sense?**

To be funny, you must put yourself out there. People weren't ready for that. These awards have helped change the conversation because the basic truth is, women are *really* funny.

**When did you realise you could make people laugh?**

At school, I had asthma and was a bit fat. I found laughter a wonderful escape. Others liked to hang out with me as we'd play weird games at break-time. I'd get amused by teachers. Since then, laughter's been my go-to. I find life hilarious and, when it's difficult, seeing the ridiculousness in it saves me. When I've had a laugh, I feel good. That heightened state is beautiful.

**You've had such a varied career, including *Ab Fab*...**

*Ab Fab*... I remember laughing a lot in rehearsals and knowing my place, very firmly. It was Jennifer Saunders' shout – her huge talent and great relationship with Joanna Lumley. One knew what the other was thinking. It made so many people happy. You still meet people today, who remind you of funny scenes.

**You're also writing your memoir...**

Yes, in which I remember all the disasters I've been in. It's the disasters that make you in life (though, I would say that). I'm excited about that happening at some point next year.

**What's left to tick off your bucket list?**

To get my fat a\*\*\* into a gym and be fitter? It's about wanting to live this bit of my life, the best way I can.

**Starting how?**

I want to be bad, now! Setting up the prize has all been about being good and helping people and I believe in that. Many years ago, I was a social worker. I wasn't a very good one, but I did want to help people. So, I'm into being nice and helpful, but part of me is a comedian. I like the bad stuff that goes down, and the freedom to talk about it. I want to let rip.



With *Ab Fab* friend Joanna Lumley



The star with hubby Chris