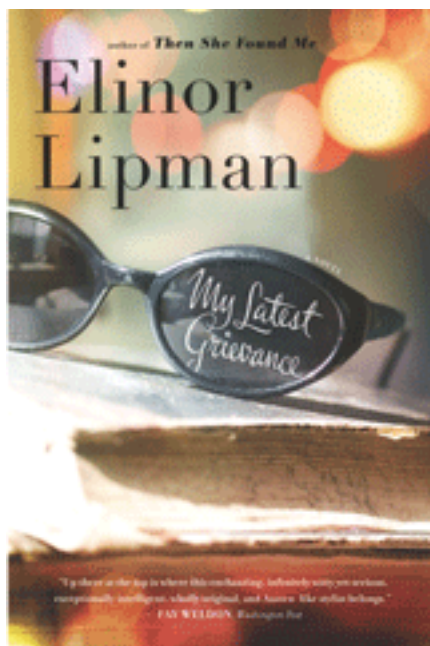


A Reader's Guide



My Latest Grievance

by Elinor Lipman

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"At the top is where this enchanting, infinitely witty yet serious, exceptionally intelligent, wholly original, and Austen-like stylist belongs." — Fay Weldon, *Washington Post*

About the Book

My Latest Grievance introduces us to Frederica Hatch. Sixteen years old and accustomed to being the center of attention, Frederica has been raised in a dorm on the campus of Dewing, a women's college just outside Boston. It's 1978, and her parents are intensely PC (before the term was coined) — two bleeding hearts that beat as one. Aviva Ginsburg Hatch is a union grievance committee chairperson and perennial professor of the year, and, to Frederica's frustration, she's the only mother around who doesn't own a jewelry box and makeup. Frederica's father, David Hatch, shares his wife's political passions and agrees with her about almost everything. Chafing under the care of the "most annoyingly evenhanded parental team in the history of civilization," Frederica is starting to feel that her life is stiflingly snug.

But then Frederica's path crosses that of the glamorous new dorm mother at Dewing, Laura Lee French, the antithesis of the Hatches. And with Laura Lee comes the best gossip in the history of the college — she is David Hatch's ex-wife. When Frederica learns the surprising news, she can't stop imagining the maternal road not taken, wondering if she was born into the wrong side of the divorce. Fearing scandal, the three Hatches and Laura Lee are forced to keep their history a secret, and havoc and hilarity ensue. The *New York Times Book Review* compared Lipman to "an inspired alchemist," and the magic continues with *My Latest Grievance*.

"It is very rare you get to read a book that holds you enchanted on every page, but Lipman's latest casts just that spell." — Nigella Lawson

"Turn Lipman loose on conflicting moralities and shifting allegiances, and you always will be entertained." — *Miami Herald*

"So entertaining you're sorry to see it end." — *Seattle Times*

About the Author

Elinor Lipman is the author of seven previous novels, including *The Pursuit of Alice Thrift*, *The Inn at Lake Devine*, *The Ladies' Man*, *Isabel's Bed*, and *Then She Found Me*. Four of her novels have been optioned for film and are in various stages of development. She divides her time between Northampton, Massachusetts, and New York City. In 2001 she won the New England Booksellers Award for fiction. She has taught at Simmons, Hampshire, and Smith colleges, which bear no resemblance to Dewing.

Questions for Discussion

1. The book is narrated by the adult Frederica Hatch as she looks back at a tumultuous teenage year. Does the author make the combined sensibility — age sixteen viewed through the eyes of the narrator's present self — work?
2. Why do you think the author made Dewing a lackluster institution rather than a top-notch college?
3. Frederica asks on page 1, "Were they types, my parents-to-be? From a distance and for a long time, it appeared to be so." Does this serve as a warning? A prediction? A wink from the author? An apology?
4. Laura Lee French's ex-husband is a distant cousin. Would the story have unfolded in the same way if she had not been a relative?
5. Marietta Woodbury and her mother are rude to Laura Lee upon first speaking to her on campus. Did this meeting resonate with you and signal *trouble ahead*?
6. The affair between Laura Lee and President Woodbury is anything but discreet. Did their public carrying on amuse or offend you?
7. The professors Hatch are passionately committed to righting wrongs and to each other. In what ways do they let their daughter down?
8. What turning point triggers Frederica's more sympathetic and respectful view of her parents?
9. One could say that the Blizzard of '78 is a character in *My Latest Grievance*. Did the author succeed in conveying the power of that historic storm and effectively put you there?

10. Did you find any character less than fully developed? What else did you want to know about him or her?

11. Laura Lee French, narcissist extraordinaire: is it possible to feel sympathy for this character?

12. Chapter 33, "Emeriti," the epilogue, brings the reader to the present. How well does the jump forward in time wrap up the story?

A Conversation with Eleanor Lipman

Your narrator, Frederica Hatch, was born and raised on a college campus. Were you?

[Laughs] Wouldn't that be a nice little autobiographical selling point? Unfortunately, no. I made her up. I did, however, graduate from an all-women's college, and I was a campus guide. My sophomore year, the system changed from housemothers to married couples. Suddenly there were highchairs in the dining hall. We students were pretty fascinated. I guess I still am — what is it like to live above the store and in a fishbowl?

Yet Frederica's parents wear two additional hats: college professors and cochairs of the faculty union.

The truth is, dorm parenting was the last hat I added. In the first partial draft, her parents were merely professors and agitators. I brought on Laura Lee French, new housemother, who I knew would wreak a little havoc on campus, but that presented a major point-of-view problem: How would my narrator report on what was happening at the college if she lived a mile away? Somewhere around page 40, I found the answer: the Hatch family had to relocate. When I saw Frederica as the Eloise of the campus, albeit a sixteen- and seventeen-year-old Eloise, then I knew I'd found my story.

Yet she's narrating the story from adulthood . . .

Because I wanted her to have the sensibility, the vocabulary, the insight, of an adult narrator. I wanted her worldview to read as smart, not precocious.

Why did you decide to make Dewing College a mediocre school?

For fun. I wanted Frederica to feel superior to the hundreds of girls who surrounded her, and once I got a taste for her high self-esteem, deserved or not, I was having a lot of fun with it. As a result, Dewing had to suffer in its *U.S. News and World Report* college ranking.

Is Dewing based on a real college?

Am I crazy? No. But I'll probably hear from a lackluster institution that has a "Longfellow Lane" running across its campus.

Laura Lee French, the new housemother who wreaks havoc on campus, comes to Dewing with a secret history.

Not so secret that I don't announce it in the first chapter: She was once married to Frederica's father.

A fact her parents choose not to reveal to Frederica.

Oh, that. Might I say on their behalf that their premarital secret was the what-if from which the whole novel sprung? I was reading Richard Russo's *The Risk Pool*, which is about a boy whose parents are divorced, and I wondered, "What if a child found out rather late, say at sixteen, that her father had been married before?"

Is that typical of where a book begins for you? A what-if?

Some begin with that, a question that intrigues me. Others with a first line or a premise. But then its characters lead the way, and usually hijack the story.

So you don't follow an outline?

Can't do it. It takes me months to come up with an idea for a new book, so when the opening sentence or the premise finally suggests itself, I just want to sit down and get going. I'm constantly puzzling over what comes next, what will my character do today and tomorrow, which leads to some trial and error, but also brings in an element of surprise — organic surprises, we hope; nothing that strains one's credulity. With Frederica and company, big things, huge things, unfolded with a coincidence of timing — the Blizzard of '78 in Boston — and from then on I felt as if I were, to borrow a phrase from Mr. Faulkner, chasing after the characters with a pencil.

Not to be too coy, but where were you in the winter of '78?

Boston! Snowed in for four days, running out of food. On the fifth day, my husband set out for work on foot, four or five miles, promising to call when he arrived. The snowbanks were up to the roofs, no sidewalks. Hours went by. Because he's exceedingly punctual and compulsive, when I didn't hear from him, I was sure he was lying by the side of the road. It turned out that the National Guard was picking up medical personnel (he was a resident, heading for the Veterans Administration Hospital in Jamaica Plain), taking them to the armory, then to their respective hospitals in alphabetical order, i.e. "V.A." was last. When he finally got on a truck, it broke down. By the time he called, about five hours after he left, I was, figuratively speaking, dressed in black.

The "grievance" of the title refers to what?

Well, a generation earlier, Frederica would have been called "a red-diaper baby." Her parents are deeply if not comically committed to the rights and wrongs of the world and their fellow employees. I refer often to the college's grievance procedure, which Frederica views as a drain on her parents' attention. She often complains — so maybe that's her main grievance — that she's raising herself.

Employee relations and unions — you know something about that, obviously.

I was public information officer for the Massachusetts Labor Relations Commission for eighteen months, and a writer for the Massachusetts Teachers Association for six years. My beat was arbitration awards, contract negotiations, and what I called "teacher features." At one point, I considered being a labor lawyer, and I think you can guess which side I wanted to represent.

Any news from Hollywood?

For years and years my answer to that questions was "a few books optioned, none produced," but I seem to have turned a corner. *Then She Found Me*, which was published in 1990, might be the first one out of the gate, thanks to Helen Hunt, who wrote a terrific screenplay and will direct it and star in it. Killer Films (*Boys Don't Cry*, *Happiness*) will produce it. And Robert Benton, who wrote and directed *Kramer vs. Kramer* and has won a couple of Academy Awards, is well along in the screenplay for *The Ladies' Man*. He will also direct it, and Tom Hanks's company, Playtone, will produce, with Hanks allegedly to star. *Isabel's Bed* is in the final stages of a second draft by the indie producer and director Eve Annenberg. Most recently, *The Pursuit of Alice Thrift* was optioned by Universal Studios for the producer Chris Weitz, who wrote and directed *About a Boy*.

We've seen your name in dozens of acknowledgments pages and several dedication pages. Who are all these people?

Well . . . friends or students whose manuscripts I read or whose chapters I edit as the writing goes along. Sometimes it's because I helped them get an agent or a publisher. It's hard to talk about this without sounding saintly and altruistic, but my unofficial agenting is basically a selfish act because I get so much pleasure out of making the match and getting the jubilant phone calls.

What tips or advice do you have for writers still looking to be discovered?

The most heartening thing I've ever heard from an editor, when she was asked, "What are publishers looking for? Are they looking for big commercial books about war and submarines and socialites?" was her answer, "I'm looking to fall in love on the first page." Another piece of advice I have to dispense gingerly every so often is "Sometimes the best form of revision is to start something new."

Do you have any special writing rituals? For example, what do you have on your desk when you're writing?

I try to begin by eight a.m. I have to have a cup of coffee in hand. My desk is usually a mess, just enough room for my mouse on my mousepad. My to-do list, the stickies, the Post-its, are always reminding me of the practical side of life — calls to make, thank-you notes to write, errands to run. If I had a stronger will, I'd shut off the e-mail and phone until I met my daily quota (five hundred words), but I'm too weak.

What are you working on now?

A new novel, no title yet. But I think I can safely categorize it as a love letter to New York City.

Give us three "good-to-know" facts about you.

1. I was nearly fired from my second job out of college, which was writing press releases for Boston's public television station. I couldn't do anything right in the eyes of my newly promoted and therefore nervous boss. I quit after three months, one step ahead of the axe, feeling like an utter failure. When I speak to students, I always tell them this.
2. Pride and joy: son Benjamin, born in 1982. Wittiest and most quotable person I know.
3. I was runner-up for the best-actress award at Lowell High School, Lowell, Massachusetts, class of '68, after playing Gabrielle (the Bette Davis role) in *The Petrified Forest* and Elaine (the ingénue-niece) in *Arsenic and Old Lace*.

What else would you like your readers to know?

I knit a lot. I wear a pedometer, aiming for five miles a day (don't be too impressed; that includes walking around my house and food shopping). Sometimes I walk no farther than my own driveway (because I can hear the phone ring; twelve round trips equal one mile). I cook quite seriously, which I think is an antidote to the writing, i.e., I finish the project in an hour or two and get feedback immediately. I watch golf on television, although I don't golf, except for visits to the driving range in spurts. I wake up at six a.m. no matter what time I go to bed. I was a roving guard on the Lowell Hebrew Community Center's girls' basketball team all through high school. My specialty was stealing the ball, but my only shot was a lay-up.

How I Came to Write This Book

My Latest Grievance began in my mind with one question, one "what-if . . . ?" and that was, "What if a child didn't find out until she was a teenager that her father had been married before?" The small details arrived fully formed, as givens: that the parents would be college professors and would be activists to a degree that I could have fun with; that Frederica would be an only child, and that the first wife would be alive and kicking. What I didn't know at first was that the Hatch family would live on campus as house parents and that Frederica would be raised in a dormitory. That (rather major) part came after I had written thirty-five pages, had given the Hatches a house off-campus, across the street from best friend Patsy Leonard. But as I was writing about Laura Lee's arrival at Dewing, I was having trouble with a first-person narrator, Frederica, who wasn't on the scene to report on Laura Lee's shenanigans. It now seems so obvious that the up-close-and-personal was essential, but it took a few chapters before I realized that and wrote the words that would open the book, "I was raised in a brick dormitory at Dewing College . . ."

All the complications and emotional havoc (better not say what at this juncture) unfolded as the characters developed, sometimes surprising me and challenging my nerve as they took a turn for the outrageous. As often happens as I write, some characters — Aviva in particular — weren't conceived as sympathetic characters, but they completely won me over. One thing I was sure of was that the final chapter (no spoiler alert needed) would be an epilogue, that readers needed to know how life turned out for the Hatches, for Dewing College, and for Laura Lee.