

‘A dozen of you is terrifying!’: what it’s really like to be a woman on the comedy scene



From left: Shazia Mirza, Allison Pearson, Helen Lederer, Kathy Lette and Marian Keyes

- **Telegraph Reporters**

8 JULY 2019 • 6:11PM

The inaugural Comedy Women in Print Prizes, which will be awarded this Wednesday, celebrate the best new funny fiction by women.

We asked prize founder Helen Lederer and several of this year’s judges for stories which show that it’s not always easy being a woman – from embarrassing personal mishaps to amusing moments of everyday sexism.

Helen Lederer (comedian, author and actress)

I was having coffee with a writer I didn’t know very well, but wanted to impress and was doing lot of flirty staring. When he asked if I’d like to read his work, I said I’d love to, and – maintaining eye contact – I delved into my handbag for my reading glasses case. I confidently took out my plastic Tampax holder instead. I might have got away with it, if a Tampax hadn’t found its way onto my pastry. Not easy to laugh off....

Shazia Mirza (stand-up comedian)

I was doing some shows in America where they are not familiar with brown women talking in an English accent. I normally do very well in America, because they think I'm Mexican. I was booked to do a show at a comedy club. I turned up and because my name is Shazia Mirza someone there assumed I was Hispanic, or Puerto Rican so they put me on Hispanic night. On top of this, they didn't believe I was a woman. They introduced me as "Mr Shazia Mirza". The host said, "Because you have so much going on, being brown, and English, we thought you were pretending to be a woman as well as part of the character."

Fanny Blake (author, journalist, former editor at Penguin)

At a smart dinner, I was placed beside the husband of one of the other guests. He was a rather pompous, well-turned-out city type. I was polite and interested as I asked him about himself. During the next 20 minutes at least, he barely drew breath. He told me about his job; his colleagues; the members of his family; what they did for a living; where they went on holiday; when his grandchild was due; the type of lawnmower he'd bought the previous week – everything.

I was in acute danger of running out of questions, when he stopped, looked at me and said,

"Enough about me. Let's talk about you."

I took a breath and waited for the first question.

"Where does your husband work?"

Kathy Lette (author)

There really should be a RSPCW – Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Writers. Especially when it comes to American book tours, which are an exercise in humiliation. One night in Pittsburgh I sashayed on stage and launched into my funny feminist routine about the sex war. Silence. Panicking, I then shot from the lip with my most lethal one-liners. Surely the audience would have quip-lash by now? ... Cue slow hand clapping. Now desperate, I told even bigger jokes – booing ensued. I shielded my eyes and looked out at the audience: 500 middle-aged white men in suits. This was not my normal crowd. Demoralised, I skulked off stage. "What the hell happened?" I asked the organizer. "Sorry," he replied, "but we got your night mixed up with Senator John McCain." Of course, the next night McCain was going to get *my* readers – feminists, lesbians, breast-feeding mums and gorgeous gay love gods. Now that really would have been funny!

Katy Brand (comedian and author)

A few times a year, we women comedians get together socially for a few drinks and a catch up. We rarely get to see each other at work, as often only one of us is booked at a time for a panel show or a gig. On one such occasion, as a couple of dozen of us were laughing and chatting, I glanced across the bar and saw two well-known male comedians gripping their pints, and staring at us silently. I went over to say hello. “What... what are you all... doing?” one of them said, with fear in his voice. “Just catching up,” I replied, “Come and join us.”

“Oh no, no, no, no,” he said, “you’re all *terrifying*”.

**The winners of the 2019 Comedy Women in Print prizes will be announced on Wednesday July 10 at London’s Conduit Club.
Details: comedywomeninprint.co.uk**