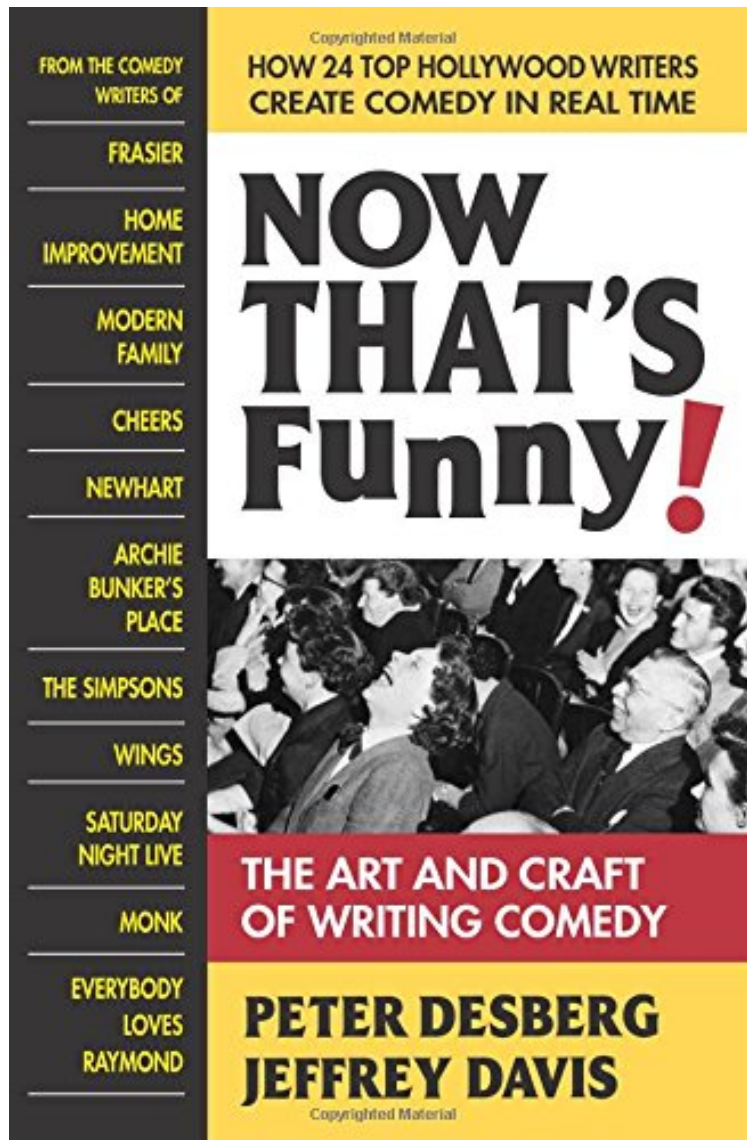


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Now That's Funny!: The Art and Craft of Writing Comedy

Peter Desberg, Jeffrey Davis

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Peter Desberg, Jeffrey Davis : Now That's Funny!: The Art and Craft of Writing Comedy before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Now That's Funny!: The Art and Craft of Writing Comedy:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Fascinating BookBy J. ToddAs someone who has written only academic papers and textbooks, I found this book about writing comedy to be surprising, informative, entertaining, educational, and supremely interesting. I have watched and enjoyed many of the TV shows the writers interviewed

here wrote for, and I never gave a thought to the complex process involved in selling, creating, producing, and broadcasting these shows. This book was very eye-opening about this process. In addition, I learned about the process and structure of writing for comedy and TV shows in general, incredibly different from the type of writing I have done. The interviews revealed that most of these writers are really nice, thoughtful, smart, fun people -- people I'd love to hang out with and get to know. I was sorry when the book was over. Clearly this book would appeal to anyone interested in writing comedy, because they would learn so much valuable information, but I think anyone with a curious mind would enjoy this book tremendously. 2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. Honest and funny writing about how to write funny. By PenNink This book was a recommended textbook in a film class I took and it's got some real gems in here. I've written a few things in the past and have done the "where was the character born, went to school, work etc." thing before. But I loved one of the authors suggestions to ask yourself how would my character react to this article today in the newspaper? What do they think of holidays? etc. The kinds of things that really imply you know your character deeply and not just on a surface level. This book is a compilation of many comedy writers different views and you'll get that many different answers to tackle your writing issues. If one doesn't work for you, try another! That's what I got out of this book. I also love the honesty. One writer when asked about how they find balance between writing so many projects answered honestly "I don't. I'm completely overwhelmed." LOL. That pretty much sums up the book. Honest and funny writing about how to write funny. Good stuff. 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Hilarious and Enlightening. By Don Elmi As a man who has studied film, I can tell you that writing comedy for TV or cinema can be one of the hardest to do. Sometimes we find ourselves wondering how the experts do it. So when I started reading Now That's Funny, I was immediately impressed by the approach that Peter Desberg and Jeffery Davis took to finding out the tips and secrets behind comedic writing. In this book, they wrote a premise for a typical sitcom pilot, presented it to renowned writers such as David Breckman (Monk), Dan O'Shannon (Modern Family, Frasier) along with 22 others and interviewed each one about where the pilot idea would go from there. This results in very insightful look at how these writers do what they do best. Upon hearing the premise of a young woman having to take in her recently widowed and overdependent mother, these writers talked about their own viewpoints and how they would use this premise if they were to make it into a show. These interviews are what makes Now That's Funny such a compelling read. The writers throw in their ideas for social conflicts between the woman and her mother, along with character developments, and motivations. It really shows you how extensive brainstorming is one of the biggest keys to getting good ideas on paper so that they can be brought to life in production. This book has a very unique way of looking into the world of writing. It's funny, inspiring, and really gives you some valuable perception of comedy experts. I definitely recommend this for anyone who has a passion for writing for TV, and want to learn more about what it takes to make it into the field.

There is a feeling of pure delight that comes from laughing out loud while watching a hilarious movie or a TV show. Yet as funny as these lines may be, they are the work of people you will never see. The magic behind any comedy hit begins when an idea is hatched in the mind of a comedy writer and is then put down on paper. And while few of us are privy to this fascinating process, for writers Peter Desberg and Jeffrey Davis, the challenge of observing and understanding how comedy is born has culminated in a unique new book, Now That's Funny! Desberg and Davis provide an intimate look into the minds of twenty-four of Hollywood's funniest comedy writers, who have given us such shows as: Saturday Night Live Monk Everybody Loves Raymond The Simpsons Frasier Maude Home Improvement Valerie Modern Family Cheers Theres Something about Mary The Honeymooners Suddenly Susan Newhart Sabrina the Teenage Witch Archie Bunkers Place The Tracey Ullman Show Wings Whos The Boss? and more How do you get to see the creative wheels turn? The authors premise was simple: Using a Q and A format, they provided each writer with a story idea and let them run with it. Each of the writers was told there were no rules, no boundaries, and no limits! Because everyone started with the same concept, the authors could see how some writers jumped in and began creating, while others asked lots of questions; how some writers stuck closely to the premise, while others turned it on its head. What emerges is an entertaining look illuminating and hilarious in turn at the creative process behind hit TV shows and movies. If you're one of the millions who have enjoyed watching the work of comedy writers, here is an opportunity to go behind the scenes and see the madness unfold. Now that's funny!

"Desberg, a clinical psychologist, and Davis, a film and TV writer, have crafted a unique twist on the familiar writing how-to guide: they came up with a premise for a television show, which they gave to 24 comedy writers/writing teams to turn into a hypothetical series . . . The unique approach, combined with the in-depth interviews, makes this a solid go-to for aspiring comedy writers." (Kristine Huntley Booklist (ALA)) About the Author Peter Desberg, PhD, received his doctorate from the University of Southern California. He is a professor of psychology at California State University, Dominguez Hills, and also a licensed clinical psychologist. For over twenty five years, he has conducted seminars and workshops on controlling stage fright for business people, students, performers, athletes, job applicants, and others. Dr. Desberg is the author of sixteen published books and numerous articles. He and his family currently reside in the Los Angeles area. Excerpt. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved. BEING THERE AS TOP

COMEDY PROFESSIONALS CREATEAs veteran comedy writer Elliot Shoenman (Maude, Home Improvement) is retracing the cab ride his father took on the way to his suicide, he wonders how much his famously cheap old man tipped the cabbie. Ken Daurio and his partner Cinco Paul are listening to notes on their film project Bubble Boy when the producer insists they lose the bubble after the first act. He wanted him out of the bubble at the end of Act I. The writers said, The movies called Bubble Boy. Hes a germ-a-phobe. Ken turned to Cinco and said, Are we changing the name of the movie to Boy? These stories illustrate just how different comedy writers are from the rest of us. They notice character quirks and conflicts they can turn into interesting and often off-kilter situations. If theres no quirk or conflict, they think, Yeah, but what if? Then they create one. How do they do it? Thats the question Now Thats Funny! sets out to answer in twenty-four unconventional interviews.

WERE IN HOLLYWOOD, NOT FRANCEIn Paris, people line up and pay to see the works at the Picasso Museum. What would it be worth to you to have been in Picassos studio at Montmartre, sitting next to him on a bench, watching him as he created his paintings? Now, imagine if you could also have been in the studios of Monet, Renoir, Degas, Chagall, Cezanne, and Matisse and you could have watched each of them as they painted. If that wasnt enough, imagine if you could also choose the object or model that all of them were to paint. Think about all youd learn, seeing commonalities, differences, and unfurled creativity as they hit each canvas. Well, were not in France, but we are in Hollywood, and those painters are all dead anyway, but this book does something similar. It puts you in a seat at the table in the Writers Room to see how some of the best comedy writers apply their brush strokes to their computers or to others in the room. If youre new to sitcoms, most shows have a gaggle of writers (around 10) who write each episode. Their process usually starts in the Writers Room as they brainstorm a story. Sometimes they sit at a large table coming up with ideas; other times, they work in smaller teams. Generally, some are specialists in story construction and others are great joke writers. Some go both ways. When Hollywood writers like Dan OShannon (Modern Family and Frasier), Sherwood Schwartz (creator of Gilligans Island and The Brady Bunch), and Phil Rosenthal (creator of Everybody Loves Raymond) are interviewed, theyre typically asked, How do you create comedy? But theyre really being asked, How did you do it? Theres an old adage attributed variously to Euripides, Mark Twain, and George Bernard Shaw: The autobiography is the highest form of fiction. In other words, when artists discuss their creative process, what we learn is more likely to be inaccurate. We tried something different. We took a left turn from the standard interview book. We asked twenty-four comedy writers to show us what they do. We gave each of them the same generic premise about a mother and her adult daughter and asked them to develop it any way they wanted. We told them there were no rules, no boundaries, and no limits. That was just as well; they wouldnt have followed rules. Theyre comedy writers, not accountants. Try and picture what we put them through. Each writer walked in cold, was handed the same premise, and was asked to begin the development process. Talk about being put on the spot! Many of them said that the interview felt like a stress test. They had to create on the fly, knowing that their work would be compared to their peers in this book. Yet each one not only succeededthey sparkled. Encouraging them to play with and develop the premise results in memorable new stories as unique as each of the writers in this book, proving that there is no one size fits all way to create comedy. The writers jump in, ask questions, develop characters, create conflicts, pitch jokes, and make casting suggestions. Some of the writers stay with the original premise, while others turn it on its head. Several of the writers choose to ignore the main characters and built minor characters into a prominent part of the story. Almost all of the writers mention they write from experience and they write what they know. Not surprisingly, several of the writers choose to take our Mother/Daughter main characters and turn their stories into Father/Son stories; thats what they know best. Some writers cast the roles with actors so they can visualize how the main characters might walk or speak. Some identify key people in their lives on whom they model their characters. Some create a story and then work the characters so they fit in comfortably. In addition to the development process, youll also read rare Hollywood anecdotes that flow naturally from each of the interviews. Many of the writers told us they give the same rehearsed answers in most interviews, but here they revealed themselves in a way they have never done before. A few told us that they planned to use material they came up with from this interview in their own work. And it all happens in real time. The writers featured in Now Thats Funny! span the history of show business from the original Golden Age of Television, with legends like Sherwood Schwartz (creator of Gilligans Island and The Brady Bunch) and Leonard Stern (co-creator of Get Smart and writer of The Honeymooners), to the generation who were influenced by them, represented by Peter Casey (co-creator of Wings and Frasier), Yvette Bowser (creator of Living Single), and Ed Decter (co-writer of Theres Something About Mary), to some of todays hottest young movie and television writers, including Hank Nelken (co-writer of Saving Silverman) and Dan OShannon (Cheers, Frasier, Modern Family). In addition, many are also show creators, show runners, producers, and directors.

ARTING AND SCIENCING IN COMEDY WRITINGTheres an old saying: Comedy writers are born, not madethats a good argument for birth control. But it brings up an interesting questioncan comedy writing be taught? We start with a core belief: You cant teach talent. Almost every writer we interviewed agreed that the gift of comedy creation is not distributed evenly. On the other side of the equation is the science of comedy, known in the industry as craft. We went to several conferences put on by the International Society of Humor Studies, where academics really do wait for itinvestigate the science of comedy. In the sessions, not one drop of actual humor was spilled. On the other hand, a great deal is known about the craft of comedy writing, and the

writers interviewed in this book share an abundance of it. As we begin our discussion of the craft of comedy writing, we thought we would open with a joke: A couple is driving out in the country and as they pass a farm, they see a bunch of barnyard animals. The husband says, Relatives of yours? She says, Yes, they're my in-laws. Here's an alternate punchline to the same joke: Yes, they're my in-laws; just look at them. It might look the same to you, but try telling the second version to somebody. When you get to the word in-laws, sure, you'll still get a laugh but it will be cut short because you're still talking. Your audience assumes something even funnier is coming and they don't want to miss it. But after they hear the word in-laws, all you're giving them is, just look at them. You've violated one of the basic rules of comedy. The climactic word must always come at the end. You never want to step on your own laughs.

THE NEED FOR CRAFT An interesting question came up in our interview with Dennis Klein (co-creator of *The Larry Sanders Show*): How often do writers create something completely original compared to the number of times they are given story ideas, characters, and constraints to develop? We're not going to be spoilers, so you can read Dennis's response yourself on page 123, but based on our interviews, the answer seems to be rarely. If you create a sitcom, you can go any way you want with it at least until someone buys it. But if you work in a Writers Room, the show and every character on that show has a history and a corresponding set of traits. Everything you create must fall within those constraints. For example, say you're writing a spec script (an unsolicited script). If it's your idea, you can go wherever you want with it. But if you're a writer who is brought in later to work on a script, you're a writer for hire, and you have to please the director, producer, and the stars if you last that long. The ratio of writers who begin with a blank slate is tiny compared with the number of writers who are given their starting point. This is why *Now That's Funny!* has so much to share with writers and anyone who is interested in comedy. It mirrors the process that most professional writers do on a daily basis. When interviewing Hank Nelken (*Saving Silverman*), he told us that he is frequently brought in by producers and executives, handed a premise, and asked to develop it. He also knew that a bunch of other writers were brought in to do the same thing; he always wondered what they came up with. He said he couldn't wait until *Now That's Funny!* is published so he can read what the other writers do with the same premise.

ARTS AND CRAFT When you hear a funny story or joke, you remember it and retell it. How well you do this may determine the course of your social life. But imagine if someone walks up to you and says, Quick, I need a joke about how fast some restaurants go out of business, yet the ones I like, I can never get into. Most people couldn't come up with that joke right away, or ever. The people interviewed in this book can come up with that joke, and as they do, they can tailor it to millennials, pro football players, middle-aged families, or their in-laws. How do they do it? In a word: craft. Here's a useful tip. If you meet a comedy writer, don't tell her a joke. That will annoy her because she already knows them all, just like every other comedy writer she works with. So if you ask a comedy writer to create the joke like the one we needed about restaurants closing and she can't think of something, one of the major tools of her craft is to take an old joke and switch it. Switching a joke means taking an existing joke and reusing it for a different purpose. Switching a joke is more involved than inserting an old joke when she can't think of a new one. First, she must find an appropriate joke from the thousands that she knows. Then she must disguise it so that it will fit into the script and appear fresh. That way, only every other comedy writer will know its origins. This is just one important part of the craft of comedy writing. It's hard to find a script without any switched jokes in it. Here's an example of a switched joke: Original: A man at a cemetery sees a tombstone that reads, Here lies a lawyer and an honest man. He goes up to a caretaker and says, Hey, since when have you been burying people two at a time? If someone came up to you and said, Quick, I need a joke about a bank president, you could easily switch this joke. Switched joke: A man at a cemetery sees a tombstone that reads, Here lies a bank president and an honest man. He goes up to a caretaker and says, Hey, since when have you been burying people two at a time?

THE MOTIVATION TO BE FUNNY We hate to use the F word, but Freud wrote a book called *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*. In that book, he explains how and why people use humor. He identifies several types of comedy. The first deals with using hostility. The joker attacks the butt of the joke and if his audience laughs, he's made a funny joke at someone else's expense. But if that audience recognizes the hostility and doesn't laugh, he is busted, and he and his joke are naked and exposed. Most of us have been in a situation where one person is making fun of another: Hey, that's a nice tie did you have to wear it because you lost a bet? In addition to using these jokes as a way to express friendly hostility between buddies, we often see such jokes on sitcoms dealing with high-profile individuals, religion, political races, different nationalities, and other easily identifiable groups. Comedy writers must be careful. Careers have ended because of one inappropriate hostile joke told in the wrong setting. Since Freud loved puns, he slipped in another category of jokes that didn't contain hostility that he referred to as harmless. These include puns and abstract jokes. Although they don't get the big laughs that hostile humor gets, to many people, they are not only funny, but they're witty. Here are two puns to show that they don't get big laughs: No one can love me like my old tomato can. Or, No matter how high you put an awning, it'll just be a shade over the street. There are some notable comedians, like Steven Wright and Mitch Hedberg, who use abstract humor brilliantly to get laughs. One of our favorite Steven Wright jokes is, I woke up this morning and someone had stolen everything from my apartment and replaced it with an exact replica. Another type of humor Freud identifies has to do with making an audience feel superior at someone else's expense. Dumb jokes, blonde jokes, racial jokes, and jokes about children's misinterpretations are examples. We, as the audience, feel good about ourselves because we would

never make the silly mistake the person or associated group in the joke displayed. Freud's idea was that with hostile jokes, you get pleasure from attacking someone else with the joke. In this type of humor, you feel good about yourself because you feel superior to someone. A nine-year-old girl was attending her first wedding. She leaned over to her mother and whispered, Mom, what does fornication mean? Her mother said, Honey, where did you hear that word? In the back of the hall. I heard the bride say to the groom, Fornication like this, we should have had champagne. The final category of humor Freud talks about is using humor to deal with painful emotions. In interview after interview, you read about people who were picked on as kids until they learned to deflect the pressure by being funny. We all remember the kid in grade school who made the bully laugh, or the kid who deflected a teacher's annoyance when someone didn't know an answer. When he cracked up the class, the awkward moment passed. People who can use tension-relieving humor are prized in almost any situation. Freud believes that this type of humor reduces the effects of emotional pain. Successful performers with disabilities or known problems use humor to downplay them and make their audiences feel more comfortable. Ray Charles once told an audience, My new lawyer has so much juice. Man, he just got me a driver's license. **WHAT MAKES THAT FUNNY!** Freud talks about what motivates people to use humor. Other psychologists have looked into what makes something funny. In their view, comedy is based on expectancy violation. Comedy writers are good at creating distractions in the same way magicians are. You think one thing will happen (expectancy) and all of a sudden, what you expected didn't happen (violation), but something funny caught you off guard and made you laugh. You are diverted with a setup, and then they get you with the punch. In an interview, Stephen King once said the secret to his writing was, I have the heart of a small boy. I keep it in a jar on my desk. Freud said reducing tension was the basis of pleasure. Here is an old joke from Henny Youngman, king of the one-liners: My wife just ran away with my best friend, do I miss him. Most people think the man misses his wife who ran away, and that he must be even more upset because it was with his best friend. He was betrayed. That's what you'd expect, but something is wrong here. Finally, he reveals that it's his best friend that he'll miss, not his wife. First, the expectancy was violated, and now it has a resolution that makes sense. Larry Gelbart (creator of *M*A*S*H*) was asked how many rules of writing comedy there are. With his accustomed lightning-fast wit, he answered, Fifty-five. He took a long beat, then, Unfortunately, nobody knows what they are. If you sat down with most comedy writers, it's doubtful that they could explain these theories. They are reserved for academics who study humor. But through their craft, comedy writers internally understand all this and use it to create comedy. So when one of them has to come up with an insult joke, he has heard just about every frame for an insult joke ever created. So he just has to slip in a new topic: How many ____ does it take to screw in a light bulb? And, if he needs to, he can probably come up with a new frame, because it was he and his kind that created it. A joke-joke is a stand-alone joke that doesn't need a story or character reference. Through the 1980s, it was common for producers to tell writers they needed three jokes per page. These forced jokes found their way into many TV shows: Oh, look, there's Barbie Cantrell out on the beach almost wearing that bikini. (In the early 90s, Jeffrey was forced to write sexist jokes. Aside from being dumb and pointless, these jokes break an important rule of comedy. Danny Simon, older brother of Neil Simon and the man who Woody Allen credits with teaching him how to write comedy, said, Never set up a straight line to accommodate a punchline. He also said, Cut your joke-jokes. Jokes are worthless unless they fit the occasion and character.) **A BAG OF CRAFTS** Sooner or later, every stand-up comedian gets floss. They're scared; they've all experienced going on stage and bombing. That's why they hold back a saver, a joke or bit they can use before the audience starts to feel sorry for them. Once the audience feels sorry for a stand-up, he's lost it. With that saver, comedians look at its probability of getting a laugh. The more craft you learn, the higher the return. It's the same with comedy writers. As they prove over and over again in these pages, they have the ability to create hilarious original material but when it's not flowing, they can reach into their knowledge of craft and come up with something funny. Writer Herbie Baker (*The Danny Kaye Show* and *The Flip Wilson Show*) has said, If you need a laugh, have the telephone ring. The more inopportune the time, the funnier the ringing phone is. When a character is under serious stress and the phone rings, who is the worst person for him to hear on the other end of the phone? His mother. Whatever he is trying to get done under all this pressure is made funnier by his mother saying, Don't you think you've wasted enough time trying to become a writer? Shouldn't you go back to pharmacy school? When she's up against it, Heide Perlman (*The Tracey Ullman Show*, *Cheers*) goes toward darker, even cartoonish, conflict and says she's rarely in the mood for nice moments. On the other hand, Leonard Stern told us that although conflict is the basis for all of his comedy, that conflict always comes out of love rather than hostility. You just read a sample above with the mom's call to her stressed-out son. A similar kind of conflict was present in almost every *I Love Lucy* episode. Lucy and Ricky loved each other, but had conflicting ways of approaching their situations. **WHY YOU MUST READ THE PREMISE FIRST** You can read this book any way you want, with one **BIG** exception. Make sure that you read the Premise at the end of this Introduction first! Each writer was given this premise, and you need to read it to be able to follow what they do as they develop it. However you plan to read this book, whether from beginning to end, or in any order you want, read the damn premise first. If you're a daring type, here are a few additional suggestions. Whether you are an aspiring writer, seasoned professional, or anthropologically inclined (a student of history of the entertainment industry), you can try to identify similarities and differences in these writers' approaches. If you are really adventurous, try your own hand at developing this

premise and then compare your efforts with the pros. Have a look at the premise we used in the interviews below.

THE PREMISE If you want something done, give it to Sarah. She will do it creatively, thoroughly, and have it done a week early. Her problem is her boss is afraid there's only room for one woman vice-president. Sarah is so focused on her work, she is unaware that she is relationship-challenged where men are concerned. In a generation where it isn't fashionable, Sarah has a great relationship with her parents. Of course, it helps that they live two thousand miles away. At their end of the country, her parents had a great life. Stylish apartment, expensive car, beautiful clothes and jewelry. Her father made sure of all that. When he suddenly dies, Sarah's mother, MOLLY, is stunned to find that their financial situation is not an iceberg with a firm 80 percent below the water level. He was obsessed with appearances. He made it they spent it. What she sees is all she has. Molly is fiftyish, broke, unprepared for even the most unskilled job. Sarah invites her mother to move in with her. Molly reluctantly agrees if it's just for a few weeks. A few weeks turns into a permanent arrangement as Molly decides Sarah's apartment, friends and lifestyle are the perfect launching pad for her new life. To complicate things even further, Molly's mother and father both have a strong work ethic and find their free-spirited daughter baffling. Sarah is actually the daughter they never had and always wanted. Molly may not have any work skills, but she has a gift with people, especially men. She wants to help her daughter's social life, but somehow she always ends up stealing the show. Sarah wants Molly to get a job or go back to school. Molly wants to examine all her options, which she now has for the first time in her life. Sarah wants the mother-daughter relationship she never had. Molly wants to be best friends.