

Groundbreaking TV Writer Speaks Out on CFS



Writer and producer Susan Harris, celebrated for her work on American television classics and hit sitcoms like *All in the Family*, *Benson*, *Soap* and *The Golden Girls*, wants everyone in America to take CFS more seriously.

BY MARCIA HARMON, DIRECTOR OF COMMUNICATIONS

Groundbreaking television writer. Taboo-smashing sitcom creator. Emmy-winning producer. Maven of the popular culture. Entertainment industry talent powerhouse.

Susan Harris is all of these things. Interestingly, however, she didn't set out to scale these lofty career heights when she was a young woman starting out in the 1960s. She says she was just a single mother who needed a job that would allow her to work from home so she could be with her son. "I took a look at the television being written at the time and thought 'I can do that.' Fortunately, it turned out that I could. But I didn't set out to be a revolutionary, or a groundbreaker. I became a writer out of necessity."

It took time and persistence, but Harris broke into the business in 1969 with a script for the NBC series *Then Came Bronson*. A year later Garry Marshall asked the producers of *Love, American Style* to give her a chance at writing an episode, which led to her writing 10 scripts for the hit series. It was while working on this show that she met Norman Lear and also began writing for *All in the Family*, a sitcom that made history with its hilarious combination of character comedy and sociopolitical themes.

Working with such talents as Marshall and Lear was heady stuff for a young writer, and Harris still considers them two of the most important influences on her work. "Garry Marshall was my mentor, he started me out, and he's an incredible talent," says Harris. "And Norman Lear was a revolutionary who had a major influence not just on my career, but on television. He helped television move from being about nothing to being about something."

Under their tutelage, Harris honed her craft and helped create a brave new world in television. "I realized that comedy could be a very powerful tool to touch on sensitive topics and social issues in a nonthreatening way—a human and humane way."

By the early 1970s Harris was also writing a few scripts for *Maude*, Lear's spinoff of *All in the Family*. During this period, most of the shows on television

employed all-male writing staffs and, although she wasn't on staff, Harris was the first female writer for the show. It was while writing for *Maude* that Harris won her first major award, the Humanitas Award, for the script "Maude's Dilemma," a sensitive examination of abortion, a topic that was almost taboo on network television at the time. Written a few months before *Roe v. Wade* made abortion legal nationwide, the episode is still considered a milestone in TV history.

Then, when Harris met producers Paul Junger Witt and Tony Thomas, it was kismet. Together, they formed a production company, Witt/Thomas/Harris, which eventually became the largest independent producer of TV comedy in the United States. Kismet of a more personal nature came into play with Witt, although it wasn't until 1983 that the two married. "I started working with Paul in 1973 and I've never worked with another producer since," says Harris. "He not only became my business partner, but my partner in life. He's amazing."

With the formation of their new production company, Harris began an incredibly productive period, not only writing, but creating and producing TV shows. She literally helped change the face of television, not only proving that women could write telling portraits of women, but that they could create well-defined male characters—and write bitingly funny comedy at the same time.

In 1977 she created *Soap*, a surprise ratings success. Harris used an innovative continuing storyline instead of the usual sitcom formula. "It was unusual for a sitcom to have this format, but I didn't want to be confined by a half-hour plotline every week," she explains.

Harris not only created and produced *Soap*, she wrote or co-wrote all the episodes in the four-year run of the show, which garnered three Emmy nominations for Outstanding Comedy Series. "Working on *Soap* was the most fun I ever had in my career," Harris says. "And creatively, *Soap* was the most fulfilling. I was working with the most talented, fantastic actors and crew, and there was so much I wanted to say."

SUSAN HARRIS

Veteran television writer, creator and producer

Winner of the Humanitas Award (1973), Emmy Award (1987) and the Paddy Chayefsky Television Laurel Award (2005)

Wife of producer Paul Junger Witt; mother of 5 children

CFS patient for more than 20 years



All in the Family



The Golden Girls

The success of *Soap* led Harris to quickly produce a spinoff, *Benson*, with Robert Guillaume as the butler in the title role. It, too, became a hit.

But something was happening to Harris that she didn't understand. In the early 1980s she started noticing subtle changes in her physical stamina. For years, she had not only managed a challenging career and motherhood, but she had been a distance runner and tennis player. "I started having periods of feeling wiped out. I had days when I couldn't manage my daily run, or could only run half of my usual distance. I knew something was wrong. I went to my internist. He said I was fine. I went to a neurologist. He dismissed my concerns. Although I had declined from being able to run 90 minutes a day, to 45, then 20, they concluded that nothing much was wrong if I could still work and be somewhat active."

Harris didn't know it then, but it was the beginning of a long, slow decline and a cycle of visits to specialists. It wasn't until she read Hillary Johnson's 1987 article in *Rolling Stone* that Harris discovered what was wrong with her—chronic fatigue syndrome—a self-diagnosis that was soon confirmed by noted CFS expert Dr. Anthony Komaroff.

Although she would never again be able to handle the triple demands of creating, producing and writing a show as she had done with *Soap*, Harris continued to build an enviable body of work. "Fortunately, I'm a writer who can work from home. I didn't have a staff job on a show. And on bad days, I didn't have to force myself to write. I don't know how CFS patients who have to go into the office every day manage it."

Working when her health permitted, Harris next developed *The Golden Girls*, a runaway hit that won 11 Emmy awards during its seven-year run, including one for Harris as executive producer in 1987.

It was while she was working on *The Golden Girls* in 1989 that Harris did something very brave. She went public with her illness and wrote "Sick and Tired," a two-part episode in which the character Dorothy, played by Beatrice Arthur, is diagnosed with CFS.

"My hope in writing that *Golden Girls* episode was to bring CFS to the attention of as many people as I could, and there's no greater device for that than television," explains Harris. "It did reach a huge audience, and it brought an overwhelming response from viewers who felt understood for the first time. But I don't think it changed the minds of very many doctors, and the skepticism in the medical community is still a problem today."

Harris went on to create, produce or write several more series in the 1980s and early 1990s, including *Hail to the Chief*, *Empty Nest*, *Nurses*, *The Golden Palace* and *The Secret Lives of Men*.

She's grateful that she never experienced the debilitating cognitive problems and brain fog that cripple the careers of so many CFS patients. "My main symptom was—and is—fatigue. I could still think, and I could work because I could write sitting down. And until the late 1990s I could still travel and do limited exercise."

But CFS continued to take its relentless toll on Harris. "In the first decade of the illness, I was still able to have a relatively full life," she recalls. "Today, I don't. I've had CFS for more than 20 years, and my health is worse now than it's ever been. My life has become more and more limited by this illness. And CFS can be a very isolating illness. Your world gets smaller and smaller when you can't do ordinary things like going out and having lunch with friends."

But Harris says it's not in her nature to grieve over her illness and dwell on the impact CFS has had on her life.



Soap

Of all genres of writing, comedy is the trickiest act to pull off. Perhaps more than any woman working in television, Susan Harris has made it look easy. Her groundbreaking contributions helped revolutionize TV's landscape and demonstrated that comedy can open minds as well as entertain.”

DANIEL PETRIE, JR.

Former president of the Writers Guild of America

“I’m pretty stoic, and I’m so aware that I have a set of high-class problems compared to most people with CFS. While I’m regretting that I won’t be able to travel because I’m too ill, there are CFS patients who are worrying about having a roof over their head because they’ve lost their job.”

But that doesn’t mean she doesn’t miss her old life.

“The thing I miss most is being able to take walks on the beach with my husband. Paul’s so supportive and understanding. But CFS has become his illness, not just mine.”

Harris’s body of work was recognized in 2005 when she won the Writers Guild of America’s highest award for television writing, the Paddy Chayefsky Laurel Award for Television. “Of all genres of writing, comedy is the trickiest act to pull off. Perhaps more than any woman working in television, Susan Harris has made it look easy,” said Writers Guild of America president Daniel Petrie, Jr. “Her groundbreaking contributions helped revolutionize TV’s landscape and demonstrated that comedy can open minds as well as entertain. This richly deserved award confirms what many in the industry have known for years—Susan’s insight, vision and sheer talent have made an extraordinary contribution to the popular culture.”

Although her place in television history is assured, Harris isn’t content to rest on her laurels. After taking six years off from writing television to concentrate her energy on raising her youngest child, she’s writing again, working on a play. And she’s once again stepping forward to raise awareness about CFS.

“I think most people still don’t understand how serious this illness is, and too many doctors are still uninformed about CFS. Perhaps because of the name, or because it’s not fatal, people don’t realize how incredibly debilitating CFS can be. But I know people with MS who can do more than many CFS patients, including me. And I have friends with cancer who have undergone chemo, and neither the

cancer nor the chemo has caused the kind of fatigue CFS can cause. Fatigue is an inadequate term because it’s not the kind of fatigue a healthy person feels. Even after an 80-hour workweek or running a marathon, you don’t feel the kind of bone-crushing, muscle-crushing, mind-crushing fatigue that CFS causes.”

Although CFS doesn’t carry the same stigma as it did when she went public with her illness in 1989 or when Olympic athlete Michelle Akers disclosed her illness in 1995, Harris believes it’s still not something that most celebrities or public figures with CFS want to publicize. “It’s understandable that celebrities with CFS have been reluctant to risk their careers talking about this illness. Disclosing that you have CFS can affect your working life. Few people want to admit that they have any potentially debilitating illness. But unlike MS or Parkinson’s, CFS hasn’t had the same Hollywood cachet or level of social acceptance in the industry. CFS just hasn’t been considered to be serious enough by the public or medical community.”

Harris wants to help change that, so she’s lending her voice as a spokesperson for CFS awareness. “There has been some progress, particularly in the last year, in increasing understanding about CFS in this country. But there’s more work to be done,” she asserts. “CFS should be taken as seriously as MS, Parkinson’s or heart disease because the impact on sufferers is just as severe.”

Until this happens, Harris believes CFS will continue to struggle for research funding and to attract top researchers and medical professionals to the field, and CFS patients will continue to struggle for respect from the health care community and the public. ■