

Tough childhood over, talk-show host Chelsea Handler fills her life with work, writes **Antonella Gambotto-Burke**

Just keep going

In Chelsea Handler's office, time is currency. It's not just Los Angeles: Handler, the second female late-night talk-show host in American history – Joan Rivers was the first, in 1983 – is charged up. Fifteen dates have to be added to her 21-city stand-up tour for *Chelsea Chelsea Bang Bang*, her third anthology of comic essays and second *New York Times* best-seller, after the original dates sold out.

The book made its debut at No 1 in late March; her previous two, *My Horizontal Life* and *Are You There, Vodka? It's Me, Chelsea*, occupied third and second place on the corresponding paperback list the same week. Her show, the E! network's *Chelsea Lately*, which gets close to a million viewers per night, has just celebrated its 500th episode. "You know, it goes by pretty quickly," she says.

Handler, 35, denies exhaustion, but her face tells a different story. "That's kind of how I operate," she shrugs. "I like to go at full speed. Kind of. I mean, either I'm doing that thing where I lie in bed watching Lifetime movies all day, or I'm super super busy."

Her trademark? The sexualised insincerity of female low-end service providers. She is the diner waitress at once dazzled by celebrity and scornful of her ability to be dazzled, the indifferently seductive air hostess who accidentally – or perhaps not – upends a tray into your lap. Handler, a long-time David Sedaris fan, wrote *Chelsea Chelsea Bang Bang* in "six or nine" months between full-time television commitments, which made it seem "more time-consuming" than her first two anthologies.

The book showcases Handler at her emotionally disorganised finest: high on psilocybin mushrooms and dancing in a restaurant with her

brother (her sister walks over and delicately notes that there is "no music playing, and you and Greg are related"); paying for Sylvan, her "big, black, British" single father-of-two driver, to join her for a vacation with Ted Harbert, then her 54-year-old de facto partner of three years and still chief executive of E!'s parent company, the Comcast Entertainment Group; and

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luxuriating in "completely unnecessary and, above all, ludicrous" lies.

"It's truly fascinating," a girlfriend notes. "I think there's a pretty strong chance you could be a full-blown sociopath."

"I wouldn't argue that," Handler concedes.

Since her January announcement that she and Harbert had broken up, Handler's life has been dedicated to work. "To be honest," she quietly says, "the thought of being in another partnership any time soon makes me almost nauseous. Right now it's between me and my dog, Chunk."

Featured on the cover of *Chelsea*

Chelsea Chelsea Bang Bang staring up his mistress' skirt, Chunk was named after Handler's Dusseldorf-born late mother, Rita, whom Handler affectionately addressed as "chunk" or "chunky". It remains Handler's favourite term of endearment, once applied to Harbert and now used to describe all little people and those who stir her surprising and deeply felt compassion. In *Chelsea Chelsea Bang Bang*, she recalls a moment from her ninth year: snuggling in bed with her mother, who had recently overcome breast cancer, and tenderly squeezing her "giant boob". Handler now corrects herself: she was actually "13 or 14" at the time of the mastectomy.

In 2008, Handler dedicated her second book, *Are You There*, to her mother ("I love you, chunky monkey") after her 2005 death from a cancer relapse. "My mother passed away before *Chelsea Lately*," she says, "so she never got to reap the benefits of me having a tonne of success. But she got a little modicum of it. She was there when I published my first book, and when I was on *Girls Behaving Badly*, another TV show. So I'm sure she's watching. I feel like she's pissed that my dad gets to go on all these vacations when she definitely deserved it more than he does."

Rita Handler first developed cancer in the wake of her first child's unexpected death. Chet, then 21, died when Handler, the youngest of his five siblings, was only nine. "He was hiking on his college graduation trip," she says after a long pause, "and, ah, he was," again, she pauses, "with his best friend from high school. My parents sent him to the Grand Tetons and he," she inhales, "had an accident and slipped."

Her parents came close to drowning in the loss. It was, she says, the turning point in all their lives,

and responsible for her father going "a little haywire". Here Handler grows skittish and her voice wavers. "It was bad. Anyone who loses a child tries really hard to blame someone – anybody – and my father was involved in several lawsuits for many years trying to sue the people my brother was with [on the hike] for culpability."

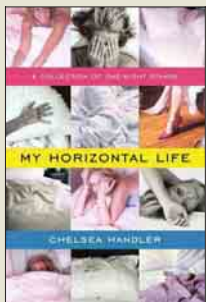
Her tone suddenly hardens. "I mean, it was ridiculous! My father dragged my brothers and sisters into court to testify; it was a really hard time for everybody. Ultimately, it made my family much closer – my brothers and sisters and I are pretty bonded because of that – but my mum turned to religion and my dad just was really angry. It's pretty hard to see your parents go through that."

Asked about her own response to Chet's death, she stops. Unevenly, she begins: "Well, what I went through..." She stops again, and then, with head-spinning celerity, dives for cover in comedy, "... led me here, so I have to be grateful, because obviously I must have major issues if I want to do a television show on the E! network!"

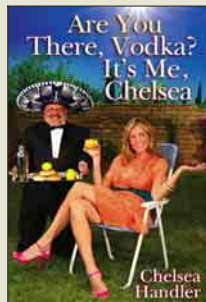
Her ease with comic revelation is deceptive. Handler's audience is so dazzled by the newness of a beautiful, articulate woman cheerfully discussing episodes of flatulence and sexual disgust that little attention is paid to her carefully staggered – and disguised – mentions of loss and sorrow.

She giggles breathlessly, although there is no joke. "My childhood is funny now, but then? Not funny. I was definitely, like, fighting for attention. A lot. I probably pushed my own grief aside for a while, but once I became a teenager, a lot of that stuff came out, whether I knew it was directly related to [Chet's death] or not. I was a bad teenager. I got into a lot of trouble, I did a lot of

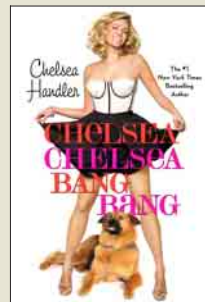
The works of Chelsea Handler



My Horizontal Life: A Collection of One-Night Stands (2005)
Handler introduces her life as amalgam of *Girls Gone Wild* (a pornographic video series) and a psychiatric case study, lurching from one sexual embarrassment to the next. "I made sure to pick stories that were humiliating because this was not about trying to make myself look good," she explained at the time.



Are You There, Vodka? It's Me, Chelsea (2008)
The title a satire of Judy Blume's young-adults classic *Are You There, God? It's Me, Margaret*, Handler's second anthology of comic essays was her first *New York Times* No 1 best-seller. School-yard bullying, paternal insensitivity, retaliatory sexual misadventures and duplicity as a lifesaving device are all explored.



Chelsea Chelsea Bang Bang (2010)
Handler's third and funniest book is stylistically looser and more confident than its predecessors, and her hilarious, plain-talking monologues – "about 80 per cent" true, as she once said – place her in any number of situations familiar to students, prisoners, and all those who exist in a state of affective chaos.