

WITH ...

# Jane Fonda, Intergalactic Eco-Warrior in a Red Coat

The leg warmers. Barbarella. The Vietnam War. Tom Hayden and Ted Turner. And she's not done yet.



By Maureen Dowd

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I wanted to be schooled by Jane Fonda.

There was a decent chance that we would get into a Megyn Kelly-type dust-up, where I waded into some topic she didn't want to discuss. But I was ready to take the risk.

I wanted Ms. Fonda, a glam Forrest Gump who has popped up on the front lines of culture, fitness, politics and Hollywood for more than half a century, to give me the lowdown on everything:

From Black Panthers to the Green New Deal, from a legendary sex life to no sex life, from plastic surgery to plastic prison handcuffs, from “Barbarella” to Quentin Tarantino, from Richard Nixon to Donald Trump, from Marilyn Monroe to TikTok, from bad vibes over Hanoi Jane to good vibrators.

And there she was on Zoom, looking fetching with her new gray pixie cut, speaking from her chic townhouse in Los Angeles.

“I went gray at just the right moment,” she said. “I didn't know Covid was coming along. I got tired of the chemicals and the time and the money to keep myself this particular color of blond, you know — enough already! And so I talked to the producers of ‘Grace and Frankie’ and I said, ‘I want to go gray, but that would mean that Grace is going to have to go gray,’ and they were all for it.”

At 82, she still has the same intensity that made her a two-time Oscar winner, an antiwar activist and an intergalactic sexpot. And a repeater.

“Do you know what a repeater is?” she said, her Pacific blue eyes trained on me. “Repeaters are the antennae that you see on top of mountains.”

She continued: “They don't originate the signals, but the bottom-of-the-valley signals get picked up and then the repeaters take them from the valley and spread them to a much wider audience. That's what celebrities are.”

## Paging Ivanka

Ms. Fonda considered herself an environmentalist before this year “but I hadn't really put my body on the line for it,” she said. She had “fished the high seas with every important man in my life, starting with my father.”

She knew about sea turtles strangling and polar bears starving. She used windmills and solar, bought an electric BMW, recycled, cut back on red meat and plastic. (But she still sneaks in the occasional order of spareribs.) She had co-produced and starred in “The China Syndrome” in 1979, about the dangers of nuclear power.

But then, last Labor Day weekend, driving up to Big Sur to hike with her pals Rosanna Arquette and Catherine Keener, she began keening about doing more.

“I was quivering all over,” she writes in her new book, “What Can I Do?”

Inspired by Greta Thunberg and by Naomi Klein's book about the Green New Deal, she decided to dig out her sleeping bag, move to Washington for a year and camp out in front of the White House to protest climate change. (Her father, Henry Fonda, made “The Grapes of Wrath” about the Depression-era drought and the Dust Bowl.)

“Where will I poop and pee?” she wondered. “I'm way older now and have to get up during the night more often.”

She didn't want to be dismissed as “an aging star bopping in from Hollywood.” But then, as she says, she “got off my duff,” bought a chic red coat from Neiman's and moved to D.C.



Ms. Fonda, center, after she was arrested and escorted out of the Hart Senate Office Building on the grounds of the Capitol on Nov. 1, 2019. Jared Soares for The New York Times

She felt that she understood Donald Trump because she recognized what she thought could be a similar dynamic in the upbringing of her third husband, Ted Turner.

“I thought, he’s been traumatized as a child, kind of like Ted as a child, so there are certain things that I understand about this kind of man,” she said. “So I thought, OK, I will find four of the most beautiful, sexy, smart, climate-interested women I can, and we’ll go in, and we’ll kneel and we’ll plead and beg.”

For the “Charlie’s Angels”-style eco-mission, she called Pamela Anderson, “and she was up for it,” she said. Ms. Fonda was still thinking about who else — “maybe Sharon Stone.”

“We’ll tell him what needs to be done and what a serious crisis this is and we’ll tell him that he will be the world’s greatest hero, that kind of thing,” she said. “I actually called Jared, or whatever his name is, and I told him my idea and he said, ‘Well, Ivanka is the environmentalist in the family.’ Yeah, sure. So she called me and I told her my idea and she laughed and I never heard from her again.”

Ms. Fonda got backup from Annie Leonard, the executive director of Greenpeace USA, who said that camping out was a bad idea — “There are going to be rats,” Ms. Leonard told her — but that there were other ways to practice civil disobedience.

Ms. Fonda had a famous mug shot from a 1970 arrest in Cleveland on charges trumped up by the Nixon White House. President Richard Nixon was angry about the actress’s protests against the Vietnam War and growled on tape, “What in the world is the matter with Jane Fonda?” And: “She looks pretty but, boy, she’s often on the wrong track.”

As Troy Garity, her son with Tom Hayden, joked at Ms. Fonda’s American Film Institute tribute in 2014, “My mother never hired a nanny to watch after me. That’s what the F.B.I. was for.”

For four months, she played her role as a repeater, becoming the star of Fire Drill Fridays, a climate protest in front of the Capitol. She got arrested five times, and checked to see whether the black plastic handcuffs used by police were recyclable.

‘This Is Where Civil Disobedience Comes In’

Back in Los Angeles, Ms. Fonda moved the action online, where she has been pleasantly surprised by the reaction. “We keep growing,” she said of the number of viewers of the Fire Drill Fridays video series with Greenpeace. “It was 100,000, it was 300,000, 400,000, now 600,000.” She has guests, including Mary Trump, who offered insights into the president’s climate denialism. And she has the new book, offering lots of helpful tips to the ecologically challenged. “Eat less fish!” (And if you have to eat fish, do it lower on the food chain, like sardines.)

Her time in the slammer caught the attention of President Trump, who told a rally in Louisiana: “They arrested Jane Fonda, nothing changes,” he said.

“She’s always got the handcuffs on, oh, man. She’s waving to everybody with the handcuffs. I can’t believe it.” He added: “Every 25 years they arrest her.”

She laughed when I brought it up.

“I am of the belief that evil deeds, which Trump is committing, is the language of the traumatized,” she said. “And you can hate the deeds. Don’t hate the person because he wins if we hate him. Don’t even give him that much energy.

“So, actually, I have empathy for him. I look at this person and I see a frightened child who is very, very dangerous because he’s got his hands on all the buttons.”

How does Trump compare to Nixon?

“Oh, it’s far more dangerous,” she said. “I can’t even believe I’m saying this. In the ’70s, I didn’t even think about the positive things about Nixon. But there was the Clean Air Act, and he did great things for the tribal nations. I mean, he actually did some pretty good stuff and he was kind of smart and he knew foreign policy. So it wasn’t so dangerous as somebody who has absolutely no limits to what he is prepared to do to take the country down.”

While she declared herself “an Elizabeth Warren girl,” she’s happy with Kamala Harris and had a virtual fund-raiser with Lily Tomlin for Joe Biden.

“My attitude is, Look, I’d rather push a moderate than fight a fascist,” she said. “You can push him,” she said, referring to Mr. Biden. “He’s already moved very far on climate.”

She continued: “We have to cut fossil-fuel emissions in half by 2030 and that’s going to be hard for him and we have to make them do it but we can. This is where civil disobedience comes in. And I will be one of the people in the streets as soon as ‘Grace and Frankie’ is over.”

When she was living with her father and hanging out with the Black Panthers, Henry Fonda told her, “If I ever find out you’re a Communist, I’ll be the first to turn you in.” In the early ’80s, she unofficially adopted Mary Williams, the daughter of two Black Panthers who could no longer take care of her.

Ms. Fonda with Angela Davis on the U.C.L.A. campus in June 1970, where they were demonstrating against the Vietnam War. DN-Bildarchiv/ullstein bild, via Getty Images

She notes that there is “a feeling of love” about Black Lives Matter protests “that was missing with the Panthers back in the ’70s. I think one reason is because women are in the leadership.” She said that around the time of the unrest in Ferguson, Mo., “one day I got in the mail some fliers about self-care from Black Lives Matter. And it was like, this is a movement that’s talking to activists about self-care? That’s new.”

In this moment when we're having a cultural re-examination of some classic works of art, I was curious to hear what she made about the conversation around "Gone With the Wind," the movie so cherished by her ex, Mr. Turner.

"Ted bought MGM so he could own 'Gone With the Wind,'" Ms. Fonda said. "I mean, 'Gone With the Wind,' he lives by that. 'The land is the only thing that matters, Scarlett. The land is the only thing that lasts!' That's why he owns two million acres, because of Scarlett O'Hara.

"He recited lines from 'Gone With the Wind' a lot. He was obsessed with Scarlett O'Hara. You know the painting from the movie, the great big painting with Scarlett? He owned it."

Was it the actual one or a replica?

"Well, Rhett threw a drink at one and shattered it," she said. "So it was the one that wasn't shattered. It was pre-shattered."

She says the movie should not be canceled, but "the context has to be given."

Also up for debate is the reputation of John Wayne, a good friend of her father's, because of a horrifying history of remarks on race.

"I personally don't think we should cancel John Wayne," she said. "But way more important is, what are we going to do about the banking system, the redlining, the mortgages, the policing, all of those things that make it impossible for Black people to lift themselves up?"

In her book, she is surprised when she meets a young woman from Hanoi who has never heard of her incarnation as "Hanoi Jane."

"Oh, I've been there a few times," she told the young woman dryly.

No matter how many times she has apologized for an ill-advised photo op on a North Vietnamese antiaircraft gun, explaining that being antiwar did not mean she was against American soldiers, she knows that some on the right will never let her live it down.

"I think, just as there are some people who actually believe that Trump is doing a good job and has fulfilled all his promises, there are people who think that I was against the troops and that what I did was treasonous, and that probably will not change," she said. "I never did let it stop me. I apologize. I try to explain the context. And then I move on."

## Jane Fonda Is on TikTok. Yes.

I wonder what she thinks about #MeToo and Hollywood. What was her experience?

"I was raped once by an actor," she said, "and I had one director, who is a French director, who said, 'Your character has to have an orgasm, so I have to see what your orgasms are like.' And I just pretended I couldn't understand him. He was talking in French."

Would "Barbarella," directed by her first husband, Roger Vadim, even be made now?

"Oh, 'Barbarella' could be made, but I would be one of the producers, and it would be a feminist movie," she said. "It was almost a feminist movie. She flew the spacecraft herself, right? She was the one that the president assigned to go to the planet to save the scientist. She was already pretty good, OK?"

If she returned to that planet with its molten lake made out of hatred and fear, she said she could come back as the matriarch bringing an army of women to rescue her child, who hatched from an egg she laid after an encounter with a blind angel.

Even though Ms. Fonda has a fascinating past, and even though she has done a lot of excavating of her past, she emphatically does not live in the past.

The woman who revolutionized the market for home videos with her fitness tape and leg warmers in the '80s is lately playing around on TikTok, doing one video that is a homage to her iconic workout for people stuck at home in fattening quarantine.



At the opening of a gym in 1979. Ron Galella/Ron Galella Collection, via Getty Images

She has done ads for Uncle Bud's CBD. "My doctor told me to give up all sleeping pills and to just use CBD," she said.

She will politely ask a new acquaintance which pronouns she should use. "I've been working with really young people," she said. "When you meet them, they give the pronouns that they go by. I'm going on 83. Do I really have to say what pronouns I go by, you know? The answer is yes and there's a learning curve."

Although a battalion of gray-haired women showed up to the Fire Drill Fridays, saying they had been "summoned by Jane," as though they knew her, the actress has friends of all ages. Unlike most, she is not down on millennials. "I think they are absolutely great and they are making a huge difference, and I feel absolutely hopeful," she said.

She drolly notes that "one of the good things about being an activist is that you come in contact with woke men."

Does Ms. Fonda, who used to hang around with Marlon Brando and Warren Beatty, think that Netflix has eclipsed the glamour of old Hollywood?

She told me to snap out of it.

"Oh, I don't share that feeling about that time," she said briskly. "I don't watch old movies, almost never. I was always outside. I didn't care about movies." She continued: "I don't romanticize that time at all, and I find that the actors today are just brilliant."

In particular, she says, she's really digging Saoirse Ronan; Michaela Coel and her show on HBO, "I May Destroy You"; Issa Rae and her HBO show, "Insecure"; and Ramy Youssef's show on Hulu called "Ramy." She said she loved the Charlize Theron's Netflix superhero movie, "The Old Guard."

She grew up around John Ford, a friend of her father's, and started her career with Joshua Logan, but the two directors she fantasizes about working with now are Quentin Tarantino and Wes Anderson.

"What I want is for Wes Anderson to come along and cast me in something that I never, ever would have thought of for myself," she said.

And what would she envision doing for Mr. Tarantino?

"Whatever he wanted," she said.

## The Coat to End All Coats

In her Netflix series, Ms. Fonda's character, Grace, is an uptight WASP, who falls into an odd-couple relationship with the free-spirited Frankie, played by her real-life friend Lily Tomlin, after their husbands declare they are in love with each other.

Ms. Tomlin said that Ms. Fonda's mantra, from the time she was a child, has been: "I can make it better."

"She's so clearly outspoken and it's always well intentioned," Ms. Tomlin said, "but she'll still say out loud on the set, 'You need a haircut,' and then she'll go around until she finds someone to cut the person's hair. And then the person will come back and say, 'Actually, it does look better.'"

"I didn't have much parenting, so it's really been my women friends that have taught me how to be," said Ms. Fonda, whose mother died by suicide while in a psychiatric facility.

Like Ms. Fonda, Grace allows herself to be molded by the men in her life, until she suddenly declares to one boyfriend that she doesn't really like golf or hoagies and she's not going to pretend anymore. Frankie teases Grace about her sparse eating habits, saying she could fit in a glove compartment, and about her plastic surgery.

I asked Ms. Fonda why she says she is renouncing plastic surgery. "I'm almost 83 years old," she said. "I mean, enough already."

She talks poignantly in the Susan Lacy documentary “Jane Fonda in Five Acts” about her bulimia, saying she started purging at boarding school. She would sometimes try to survive, feeling famished, on a soft-boiled egg and a bit of spinach for the whole day.

She writes in her memoir that her father’s criticisms of her weight when she was a teenager messed her up. I ask her why her father would complain, when she was already so thin.

“He had issues,” she said, summing up a world of pain and psychoanalysis in three words.

Yet even when she pulled away from bulimia, she kept a lithe figure.

“There was a time when I was anorexic, but I never got below 112,” she said. “I don’t let it get too far out of hand. I’m not at my fighting weight right now. I’m 127. My fighting weight is about 119. So, you know, when we get three weeks out from shooting ‘Grace and Frankie,’ I’ll lose 10 pounds.”

Ms. Fonda with her “Grace and Frankie” co-star Lily Tomlin at the Costume Designers Guild Awards in February 2017. Chris Pizzello/Invision, via Associated Press

She said that she eats healthy and works out with a trainer, wearing masks and gloves. “And I have fillers,” she said. “And I’m an activist, so I feel good, and I think that’s the most important part of it. If I felt grumpy and depressed, I wouldn’t look so good.

“And the other thing is, I have good posture. And, believe it or not, that is critical. I’ve worked hard to have a very strong back.”

In keeping with her focus on the environment, she has sworn off shopping and said that her renowned red coat from Fire Drill Fridays would be the last thing she ever buys.

Really?

“Really,” she replied. “Never again. I have two closets full of clothes. I have clothes that I wore 30 years ago. I can still wear them. That’s one thing about not putting on too much weight. And when I can’t wear anything anymore, I just sell it now.”

She said she sold 40 of her 50 pairs of bluejeans two weeks ago.

“Well, let me just explain,” she said. “When I met Ted, he had six properties. When I left, he had 23. And we kept clothes at each place. And so I would have to buy in bulk. I remember very often at Saks Fifth Avenue, the sales girl would say ‘Are these gifts?’ And I’d say, ‘No, they’re all for me.’”

Although she dates up a storm in “Grace and Frankie,” and gets involved in selling yam lube cooked up by Ms. Tomlin’s character, as well as vibrators for older women, with large-print instructions and a grip that won’t aggravate arthritis, Ms. Fonda said two years ago that she had “closed up shop down there.”

After a lifetime of being a chameleon, changing to please her father and three very different husbands, Ms. Fonda breezily says now, “I have no interest.”

“I don’t have time,” she said. “I am fully complete with me and my children and my grandchildren and my friends. I don’t want any more romance. I don’t have time for it.”

She recalled that when she was with Mr. Turner, in order to find time to write, she would have to abscond with her laptop in the middle of their fishing trips.

“You know, just about every day,” she said, “I’ll be in the middle of something and think, I would never have had time to do this or read this if I was trying to keep a relationship good.”

But she must get hit on. I told her that my researcher, Shawn McCreesh, has just watched “Barbarella” for the first time. Also, he saw her in the elevator at The Times when she visited our office during Fire Drill Fridays and thinks she’s a stone-cold fox.

“Is that good or bad?” she wondered.

She said no one propositions her anymore.

“Zero,” she said. “No, and I’m not lonely. I’ve never been lonely. I’ve never been bored or lonely in my life.”

So if she had a free Saturday night, what would she do?

“Read,” she said. “And between the fact that I’m alone plus the Covid, I’m discovering so much TV.”

After the “Grace and Frankie” plotline about her company selling sex toys was introduced, and after she talked on “Ellen” about one vibrator, which hangs from a silver necklace and looks like jewelry, fans began sending her vibrators.

“I have a drawer full of vibrators,” she said. “It’s amazing.”

I asked if she would be scared to use one that came in the mail from a fan.

“I don’t know,” she said, grinning. “Maybe I’d ask someone else to try it first.”

As the title character in the 1968 science fiction film “Barbarella.” Silver Screen Collection/Getty Images

*[Before you cue up the workout video, a Confirm or Deny stretch.]*

**Maureen Dowd: Your greatest regret is that you never had sex with Che Guevara.**

Jane Fonda: No, I don’t think about him. Who I do think about, and what is a great regret is Marvin Gaye. He wanted to and I didn’t. I was married to Tom. I was meeting a lot of performers to try to do concerts for Tom and the woman who was helping me do that introduced me to Marvin Gaye.

**Please tell me his pickup line included the words “sexual healing.”**

I needed some but he didn’t say that, no. But then I read, apparently he had my picture on his refrigerator. I didn’t find that out until later, after he was dead.

**You went to birthday parties at Christina Crawford’s and hung up your coat on wire hangers.**

I was too young to know from a wire hanger. In fact, I don’t think I had ever seen a wire hanger in my life. We were very young. We all had governesses in uniforms. And there was a Ferris wheel and an elephant.

**Joan Crawford terrified you.**

I didn’t know who she was, except that she had these dark eyebrows and she seemed to be very tall and imposing and she was responsible for this whole mishegoss, and I had to curtsy.

**Simone Signoret is the sexiest woman you ever met.**

Ava Gardner was the sexiest woman I ever met. Without question. She was a mensch, a true mensch, and she was a babe.

**You and Tom Hayden walked out of “Last Tango in Paris.”**

Yes. But it was because North Vietnam was being bombed. Kissinger started bombing the north again, and we were so upset.

**You love the song “Jane Fonda” by Mickey Avalon.**

I’ve heard it. I don’t know if I love it.

**Ted Turner used to dress up like Rhett Butler, play the music from “Gone With the Wind” and sweep you up the stairs.**

(Laughs.) No. However, one day when we were driving to one of his ranches in his Jeep over the bumpy roads and my brother and his wife were with us, he suddenly stopped the car and got out and pulled me out and grabbed me in his arms and sang “Don’t Fence Me In.”

**Your leg warmers are more famous than Jennifer Beals’s “Flashdance” leg warmers.**

Probably. Because my leg warmers came into people’s living rooms day after day after day after day. And so they became friends of people.

**You bought a white stallion from Mike Nichols.**

I bought a mare, a bay mare, Evita, from Mike Nichols.

**You are related to Jane Seymour, one of the wives of Henry VIII.**

That’s what my mother always told me and it’s why my name until the fourth grade was Lady.

**Your character in “Monster-in-Law” brags at a dinner party about sitting next to me, the Sultan of Brunei, Carrie Fisher and Snoop Dogg.**

I don’t remember.

**You regret not taking the Mia Farrow role in “Rosemary’s Baby.”**

I don’t think about it.

**Katharine Hepburn gave you some good advice when you were filming “On Golden Pond.”**

She watched me fumble my way into learning how to do a back flip and she knew that I had been very scared to do it. And she said, “Don’t get soggy,” meaning always confront your fears.

**Marlon Brando was ...**

Disappointing. But a great actor.

**You were in Lee Strasberg’s acting class with Marilyn Monroe.**

Yes. She liked me. I think she liked me because she sensed my insecurities and she was drawn to vulnerable things. I’ll never forget a party that Lee Strasberg gave and she came late, and she walked in and men there started to shake. I mean, they were physically excited and agitated by the fact that she was there. And she walked straight to me and wanted to talk.

**Marilyn was not as striking in person.**

She glowed! There was a glow coming out of her that was unbelievable! It came from her skin and her hair and her being. I’ve never seen anything like it.