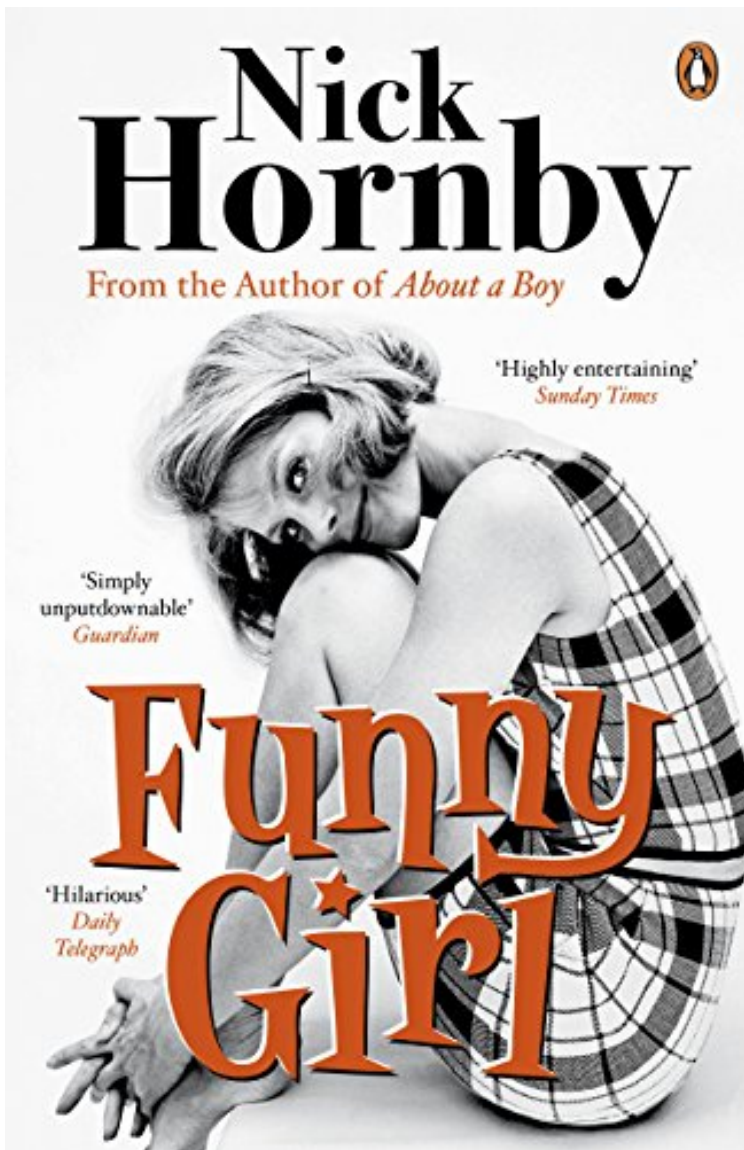


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Funny Girl



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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurFunny Girl - the much-anticipated new novel by Nick Hornby, the million-copy bestselling author of About a BoyMake them laugh, and they're yours forever . . . It's the swinging 60s and the nation is mesmerized by unlikely comedy star Sophie Straw, the former Blackpool beauty queen who just wants to make people laugh, like her heroine Lucille Ball.Behind the scenes, the cast and crew are having the time of their lives. But when the script begins to get a bit too close to home, and life starts imitating art, they all face a choice. The writers, Tony and Bill, comedy obsessives, each harbour a secret. The Oxbridge-educated director, Dennis, loves his job but hates his marriage. The male star Clive, feels he's destined for better things. And Sophie Straw, who's changed her name and abandoned her old life, must

decide whether to keep going, or change the channel. Nick Hornby's new novel is about popular culture, youth and old age, fame, class and teamwork. It offers a wonderfully captivating portrait of youthful exuberance and creativity, and of a period when both were suddenly allowed to flourish. Fans of Hornby will love this book, as will readers of David Nicholls, Mark Haddon and William Boyd. Excerpt*** This excerpt is from an advance uncorrected proof*** Copyright 2015 Nick Hornby

1 She didnt want to be a beauty queen, but as luck would have it, she was about to become one. There were a few aimless minutes between the parade and the announcement, so friends and family gathered round the girls to offer congratulations and crossed fingers. The little groups that formed reminded Barbara of licorice Catherine wheels: a girl in a sugary bright pink or blue bathing suit at the center, a swirl of dark brown or black raincoats around the outside. It was a cold, wet July day at the South Shore Baths, and the contestants had mottled, bumpy arms and legs. They looked like turkeys hanging in a butchers window. Only in Blackpool, Barbara thought, could you win a beauty competition looking like this. Barbara hadnt invited any friends, and her father was refusing to come over and join her, so she was stuck on her own. He just sat there in a deck chair, pretending to read the Daily Express. The two of them would have made a tatty, half-eaten Catherine wheel, but even so, she would have appreciated the company. In the end, she went over to him. Leaving the rest of the girls behind made her feel half naked and awkward, rather than glamorous and poised, and she had to walk past a lot of wolf-whistling spectators. When she reached her fathers spot at the shallow end, she was probably fiercer than she wanted to be. What are you doing, Dad? she hissed. The people sitting near him, bored, mostly elderly holidaymakers, suddenly went rigid with excitement. One of the girls! Right in front of them! Telling her father off ! Oh, hello, love. Why wouldnt you come and see me? He stared at her as if shed asked him to name the mayor of Timbuktu. Didnt you see whateveryone else was doing? I did. But it didnt seem right. Not for me. What makes you so different? A single man, running . . . amok in the middle of a lot of pretty girls wearing not very much. Id get locked up. George Parker was forty-seven, fat, and old before he had any right to be. He had been single for over ten years, ever since Barbaras mother had left him for her manager at the tax office, and she could see that if he went anywhere near the other girls hed feel all of these states acutely. Well, would you have to run amok? Barbara asked. Couldnt you just stand there, talking to your daughter? Youre going to win, arent you? he said. She tried not to blush, and failed. The holidaymakers within earshot had given up all pretense of knitting and reading the papers now. They were just gawping at her. Oh, I dont know. I shouldnt think so, she said. The truth was that she did know. The mayor had come over to her, whispered Well done in her ear, and patted her discreetly on the bottom. Come off it. Youre miles prettier than all the others. Tons. For some reason, and even though this was a beauty contest, her superior beauty seemed to irritate him. He never liked her showing off, even when she was making her friends and family laugh with some kind of routine in which she portrayed herself as dim or dizzy or clumsy. It was still showing off. Today, though, when showing off was everything, the whole point, shed have thought he might forgive her, but no such luck. If you had to go and enter a beauty pageant, he seemed to be saying, you might at least have the good manners to look uglier than everyone else. She pretended to hear parental pride, so as not to confuse her audience. Its a wonderful thing, a blind dad, she said to the gawpers. Every girl should have one. It wasnt the best line, but shed delivered it with a completely straight face, and she got a bigger laugh than she deserved. Sometimes surprise worked and sometimes people laughed because they were expecting to. She understood both kinds, she thought, but it was probably confusing to people who didnt take laughter seriously. Im not blind, said George flatly. Look. He turned around and widened his eyes at anyone showing any interest. Dad, youve got to stop doing that, said Barbara. It frightens people, a blind man goggling away. You . . . Her father pointed rudely at a woman wearing a green mac. Youve got a green mac on. The old lady in the next deckchair along began to clap, uncertainly, as if George had just that second been cured of a lifelong affliction, or was performing some kind of clever magic trick. How would I know that, if I was blind? Barbara could see that he was beginning to enjoy himself. Very occasionally he could be persuaded to play the straight man in a double act, and he might have gone on describing what he could see forever, if the mayor hadnt stepped up to the microphone and cleared his throat. It was Auntie Marie, her fathers sister, who suggested that she should go in for Miss Blackpool. Marie came round for tea one Saturday afternoon, because she happened to be passing, and casually dropped the competition into the conversation, and a sudden thought struck her why shed never had a go, while her dad sat there nodding his head and pretending to be thunderstruck by the brilliance of the idea. Barbara was puzzled for the first minute or two, before she realized that the two of them had cooked up a plan. The plan, as far as she could work out, was this: Barbara entered the pageant, won it and then forgot all about moving to

London, because there'd be no need. She'd be famous in her own hometown, and who could want for more?

And then she could have a go at Miss UK, and if that didn't work out she could just think about getting married, when there would be another coronation, of sorts. (And that was a part of the beauty pageant plan too, Barbara was sure. Marie was quite sniffy about Aidan, thought she could do much better, or much richer, anyway, and beauty queens could take their pick. Dotty Harrison had married a man who owned seven carpet shops, and she'd only come third.) Barbara knew she didn't want to be queen for a day, or even for a year. She didn't want to be a queen at all. She just wanted to go on television and make people laugh. Queens were never funny, not the ones in Blackpool anyway, or the ones in Buckingham Palace either. She'd gone along with Auntie Marie's scheme, though, because Dorothy Lamour had been Miss New Orleans and Sophia Loren had been a Miss Italy runner-up. (Barbara had always wanted to see a photograph of the girl who had beaten Sophia Loren.) And she'd gone along with it because she was bursting to get on with her life, and she needed something, anything, to happen. She knew she was going to break her father's heart, but first she wanted to show him that she'd at least tried to be happy in the place she'd lived all her life. She'd done what she could. She'd auditioned for school plays, and had been given tiny parts, and watched from the wings while the talentless girls that the teachers loved forgot their lines and turned the ones they remembered into nonsense. She'd been in the chorus line at the Winter Gardens, and she'd gone to talk to a man at the local amateur dramatic society who'd told her that their next production was *The Cherry Orchard*, which probably wouldn't be her cup of tea. He asked whether she'd like to start off selling tickets and making posters. None of it was what she wanted. She wanted to be given a funny script so that she could make it funnier. She wished that she could be happy, of course she did; she wished she wasn't different. Her school friends and her colleagues in the cosmetics department at R. H. O. Hills didn't seem to want to claw, dig, wriggle and kick their way out of the town like she did, and sometimes she ached to be the same as them. And wasn't there something a bit childish about wanting to go on television? Wasn't she just shouting, Look at me! Look at me! like a two-year-old? All right, yes, some people, men of all ages, did look at her, but not in the way that she wanted them to look. They looked at her blonde hair and her bust and her legs, but they never saw anything else. So she'd enter the competition, and she'd win it, and she was dreading the look in her father's eyes when he saw that it wasn't going to make any difference to anything. The mayor didn't get around to it straight away, because he wasn't that sort of man. He thanked everyone for coming, and he made a pointless joke about Preston losing the Cup Final, and a cruel joke about his wife not entering this year because of her bunions. He said that the bevy of beauties in front of him and he was just the sort of man who'd use the expression bevy of beauties made him even prouder of the town than he already was. Everyone knew that most of the girls were holidaymakers from Leeds and Manchester and Oldham, but he got an enthusiastic round of applause at that point anyway. He went on for so long that she began to try and estimate the size of the crowd by counting the heads in one row of deckchairs and then multiplying by the number of rows, but she never finished because she got lost in the face of an old woman with a rain hat and no teeth, grinding a piece of sandwich over and over again. That was another ambition Barbara wanted to add to the already teetering heap: she wanted to keep her teeth, unlike just about every one of her relatives over the age of fifty. She woke up just in time to hear her name, and to see the other girls pretending to smile at her. She didn't feel anything. Or rather, she noted her absence of feeling and then felt a little sick. It would have been nice to think that she'd been wrong, that she didn't need to leave her father and her town, that this was a dream come true and she could live inside it for the rest of her life. She didn't dare dwell on her numbness in case she came to the conclusion that she was a hard and hateful bitch. She beamed when the mayor's wife came over to put the sash on her, and she even managed a smile when the mayor kissed her on the lips, but when her father came over and hugged her she burst into tears, which was her way of telling him that she was as good as gone, that winning Miss Blackpool didn't even come close to scratching the itch that plagued her like chickenpox. She'd never cried in a bathing suit before, not as a grown woman anyway. Bathing suits weren't for crying in, what with the sun and the sand and the shrieking and the boys with their eyes out on stalks. The feeling of wind-chilled tears running down her neck and into her cleavage was peculiar. The mayor's wife put her arms around her. Im all right, said Barbara. Really. Im just being silly. Believe it or believe it not, I know how you're feeling, said the mayor's wife. This is how we met. Before the war. He was only a councillor then. You were Miss Blackpool? said Barbara. She tried to say it in a way that didn't suggest amazement, but she wasn't sure she'd managed. The mayor and his wife were both large, but his size seemed intentional somehow, an indication of his importance, whereas hers seemed like a terrible mistake. Perhaps it was just that he didn't care and she did. Believe it or believe it not. The two women looked

at each other. These things happened. There was no need to say anything else, but then the mayor came over to them and said something else anyway. You wouldnt think so to look at her, said the mayor, who was not a man to let the unspoken stay that way. His wife rolled her eyes at him. Ive already said believe it or believe it not twice. Ive already admitted that Im no Miss Blackpool anymore. But you have to come clomping in anyway. I didnt hear you say believe it or believe it not. Well I did. Twice. Didnt I, love? Barbara nodded.

She didnt really want to be drawn in, but she thought she could offer the poor woman that much at least. Kiddies and cream buns, kiddies and cream buns, said the mayor. Well, youre no oil painting, his wife said. No, but you didnt marry me because I was an oil painting. His wife thought about this and conceded the point with silence. Whereas that was the whole point of you, said the mayor. You were an oil painting.

Anyways, he said to Barbara. You know this is the biggest open-air baths in the world, dont you? And this is one of the biggest days here, so youve every right to feel overcome. Barbara nodded and snuffled and smiled.

She wouldnt have known how to begin to tell him that the problem was exactly the opposite of the one hed just described: it was an even smaller day than she feared it would be. That bloody Lucy woman, her father said. Shes got a lot to answer for. The mayor and his wife looked confused, but Barbara knew who he was talking about. She felt understood, and that made it worse. Barbara had loved Lucille Ball ever since she saw I Love Lucy for the first time: everything she felt or did came from that. The world seemed to stand still for half an hour every Sunday, and her father knew better than to try and talk to her or even to rustle the paper while the program was on, in case she missed something. There were lots of other funny people she loved: Tony Hancock, Sergeant Bilko, Morecambe and Wise. But she couldnt be them even if shed wanted to. They were all men. Tony, Ernie, Eric, Ernie . . . There was nobody called Lucy or Barbara in that lot. There were

no funny girls. Its just a program, her father would say, before or after but never during. An American program. Its not what I call British humor. And British humor . . . Thats your special phrase for humor from Britain, is it? The BBC and so forth. Im with you. She only ever stopped teasing him because she got bored, never because he cottoned on and robbed the teasing of its point. If she had to stay in Blackpool, then one of

her plans was to keep a conversation like this going for the rest of his life. Shes not funny, for a start, he said. Shes the funniest woman whos ever been on television, said Barbara. But you dont laugh at her, said her father. It was true that she didnt laugh, but that was because shed usually seen the shows before. Now she was too busy trying to slow it all down so she could remember it. If there was a way of watching Lucy every single day of the week, then she would, but there wasnt, so she just had to concentrate harder than shed ever

concentrated on anything, and hope that some of it sank in. Anyway, you make me shut up when theyre reading out the football results on the wireless, she said. Yes, because of the pools, he said. One of those football results might change our life. What she couldnt explain without sounding batty was that I Love Lucy was exactly the same as the pools. One day, one of Lucys expressions or lines was going to change her life, and maybe even his too. Lucy had already changed her life, although not in a good way: the show had separated her from everyone else friends, family, the other girls at work. It was, she sometimes felt, a bit like

being religious. She was so serious about watching comedy on the television that people thought she was a bit odd, so shed stopped talking about it. The photographer from the Evening Gazette introduced himself and ushered Barbara toward the diving boards. Youre Len Phillips? her father said. Youre not pulling my leg? He recognized Len Phillipss name from the paper, so he was starstruck. Dear God, Barbara thought. And he wonders why I want to get out of here. Can you believe that, Barbara? Mr. Phillips has come to the baths personally. Call me Len. Really? Thank you very much. George looked a little uncomfortable, though, as if the honor had not yet been earned. Yes, well, he probably hasnt got a staff of thousands, said Barbara. Its just

me, and a lad sometimes, said Len. And todays a big day for Blackpool. Id be daft to let the lad do it. He gestured at Barbara to move back a little. Say cheese, her father said. Or is it only amateurs who do that? No, we do it too. Although sometimes I shout Knickers! just for a change. George laughed and shook his head in wonder. He was having the time of his life, Barbara could tell. No boyfriend? Len asked. He couldnt get the day off, Len, George said. He paused for a moment, clearly wondering whether hed got too familiar, too soon. Theyre short-staffed, apparently, because of the holidays. Her Auntie Marie couldnt come either, because shes gone to the Isle of Man for a fortnight. Her first holiday for seven years. Only a caravan, but, you know. A change is as good as a rest. You should be writing all this down, Len, said Barbara. Caravan.

Isle of Man. A change is as good as a rest. Is it just her and Uncle Jack, Dad? Or have the boys gone too? He doesnt want to know all that, said her father. Where does she work? Len asked, nodding his head toward Barbara. I dont know. We could ask her, said Barbara. Shes in the cosmetics department at R. H. O. Hills, her father said. And Aidans in Menswear. Thats how they met. Well, she wont be there much now, will she? said

the photographer. Wont she? said George. Im always taking photographs of Miss Blackpool. Hospitals, shows, charity galas . . . Shes got a lot of responsibilities. Itll be a busy year. Well be seeing each other a lot, Barbara, so youll have to get used to my ugly mug. Oh, Lord, said her father. Did you hear that, Barbara? Hospitals? Charity galas? An entire year? What had she been thinking? Auntie Marie had told her about the shop openings and the Christmas lights, but she hadnt thought about how shed be letting people down if she just disappeared, and she hadnt thought about how shed still be Miss Blackpool in three hundred and sixty-four days time. She knew then that she didnt want to be Miss Blackpool in an hours time. Wheres she going? said Len. Where are you going? said her father. Fifteen minutes later, the runner-up, Sheila Jenkinson, a tall, dopey redhead from Skelmersdale, was wearing the tiara, and Barbara and her father were in a taxi on their way back home. She left for London the following week. *Revue de presse* Beautifully captures the thrill of youthful success and of discovering your own talent (*Daily Telegraph*) *Funny Girl* may be read as Hornby's latest defence of popular entertainment against high-culture elitism. *Funny Girl* makes his case for him eloquently and entertainingly ... both hugely enjoyable and deceptively artful (*Spectator*) I loved this hymn to the 1960s, their infinite creative possibilities (*Scotsman*) Vivid, sparky, a bit schmaltzy, and it rattles along (*Independent*) Endearing, humorous and touching. Hugely enjoyable (*Sunday Mirror*)