

FASHION & STYLE | SCENE STEALERS

Amy Alkon's Crusade Against Rudeness

By **BROOKS BARNES** JUNE 20, 2014

SANTA MONICA, Calif. — Please let me be on time for the maniacal manners lady. I don't want her to scold me. Please, pretty please, don't let me be late.

You would be nervous too: Amy Alkon, the author of a syndicated advice column and two books on rudeness and manners, is also known as Emily Postal. The residents and shoppers of Abbot Kinney, the trendy Venice retail and restaurant strip, know her as the tall redhead who emerges in an evening dress and a big hat to police behavioral infractions big and small.

She is the one who shushes noisy cellphone talkers, started a shaming campaign against people who drive S.U.V.s, and posts photos on telephone poles of people who do things like litter. "One of my biggest accomplishments was becoming kind of a bitch," Ms. Alkon told me on the phone. "I just hop on my broom."

As I sat in traffic, a rivulet of sweat ran down my temple. Should I call to alert her? No, she may consider that rude in and of itself. In her new book, "Good Manners for Nice People Who Sometimes Say" a word that The New York Times is too polite to print, Ms. Alkon writes that "the spontaneous phone call has largely become rude." (Better to text or email to set up a time.)

I decided to honk my horn. Politely.

Ms. Alkon, 50, agreed to meet for coffee to discuss her book, which was published this month by St. Martin's Griffin and follows a 2009 memoir called "I See Rude People." Her latest tome tackles all the usual etiquette questions. Who pays on a date? The man, at least on the first few outings; a woman, she reasons, typically goes to considerable effort to get ready, while "a guy pretty

much just has to run through the sprinklers and shake off.”

But “Good Manners for Nice People” is also a type of manifesto.

Having first-rate manners, Ms. Alkon contends, does not always involve going quietly. Her theory, which she backs up by citing studies and interviews with social scientists, involves theft — the notion that late-night noise, gas-guzzling S.U.V.s and showboating at parties is actually stealing. “Those people are robbing something from the rest of us, whether it’s sleep, clean air or attention,” Ms. Alkon said. “Would you let someone who steals money from you get away without making a peep?”

A peep does not exactly describe what Ms. Alkon did a few years ago after deciding Range Rovers, Chevy Tahoes and Cadillac Escalades had become a nuisance in her gentrifying neighborhood. She printed cards and tucked them under windshield wipers. They read in part: “Road-hogging, gas-guzzling, air-fouling vulgarian! Clearly you have an extremely small penis, or you wouldn’t drive such a monstrosity. For the adequately endowed, there are hybrids or electrics.”

The cards listed a phone number (since disconnected) on which she continued the rant with a recorded message. “Piggy, piggy, piggy,” it started.

Ms. Alkon’s confrontational style has won her loyal readers. Her column, *The Advice Goddess*, appears every week in roughly 100 publications. And some of her neighbors are quite fond of her, in part because she is so vigilant about protecting their quality of life. “We need more people like Amy,” said Reta Moser, a Venice resident who publishes the *Triangle Update*, a local news site. “She’s kind of a neighborhood leader, and other people follow her example to say: ‘We’re going to speak up. We aren’t accepting these things.’”

But Ms. Alkon has also made a few enemies in sleepy, laid-back Venice.

“She is on the edge of completely insane,” said Joe O’Brien, a furniture designer who has had multiple run-ins with Ms. Alkon on Abbot Kinney, where he used to own a shop called Cabana Joe’s. He once left her a voice mail message warning that he planned to call the police; she printed the message in a column with the headline “Hello, Psycho!”

“She makes a living by disturbing people and then writing about their

reaction,” he said. “It’s despicable and gross.”

Ms. Alkon sees public shaming as a critical enforcement tool. “There has to be a reputational cost,” she said. She calls it “rudenfreude,” or the “joy of seeing those who abuse the rest of us called out for what tiny sociopathic little tyrants they are.”

But Ms. Alkon also concedes that she can go too far. One day, she was working at home with her windows shut when a woman on the street started yelling on a cellphone. “I stomped out onto my porch, glared over my fence at her and hissed, ‘I can hear you *inside my house*,’” she writes in her new book. A shouting match ensued. The woman finally left, but not before vandalizing Ms. Alkon’s mailbox.

The lesson: “I don’t have perfect manners — nobody does, because this isn’t an episode of ‘Downton Abbey,’” she said in an interview. “The goal is to improve. In that case, I turned it into an example for how I wouldn’t behave in the future.”

Cities, in particular, breed rudeness, Ms. Alkon maintains, because people are not designed to live in such seas of humanity. “We live in societies that are too big for our brains to handle,” she said. “If you are around people you think you will never see again, you are more likely to behave rudely.” Los Angeles is especially bad, she said, because its car culture isolates people even further.

Ms. Alkon grew up in the Detroit suburbs, the eldest of three sisters, and describes her early childhood as torturous — bullying, teasing, few friends. She attended the University of Michigan and New York University. Once in New York, she fit in perfectly with the colorful 1980s-era characters of TriBeCa and SoHo, where she would ride a bike painted with orange and pink leopard spots.

One day in 1988, Ms. Alkon and two of her friends thought it would be funny to set up chairs on a street corner and offer free advice. The Advice Ladies, as they came to be called, popped up on Saturdays in good weather until the mid-1990s. They even had a magazine rack for their faux waiting room. Ms. Alkon had found her calling.

Contradiction is part of what makes Ms. Alkon so captivating. On one

hand, she decries bullies; on the other, she can be one. She believes that “our cover charge for living in this world is one kind act a day for someone else, bare minimum.” And yet she publicly ridicules people whose behavior falls outside the lines — her lines.

Perhaps the biggest contradiction: The hisser can also be utterly lovely.

As it turned out, Ms. Alkon was running a few minutes late for our meeting, too. She was quirky — it was 2 p.m. on a Saturday in a beach town, and she was wearing an evening gown — but she was also smart, articulate, kind and funny. A pretty woman who looks much younger than her age, Ms. Alkon spoke lovingly of Aida, her Chinese Crested dog, and Gregg Sutter, her longtime boyfriend.

“I don’t think I’m terrifying,” she said as we walked around the neighborhood. “I perceive myself as goofy.”

She paused to give some spare change to a homeless man. “I’m just proactive,” she continued. “Most people stand around blinking like livestock. That’s not me.”

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