



October 23, 2003
CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK; To Stars, Writing Books Looks Like Child's Play

By MICHIKO KAKUTANI

Correction Appended

Once upon a time there was a land in love with fame and brand names. By and by, some famous brand-name people, holed up in their castles, discovered a new trade. They started writing books for children.

Many wrote books about children who sounded like themselves. Jerry, a comedian who made pots of gold with a television show and more pots of gold with commercials for a credit card, wrote a Halloween book about a greedy boy who wants to get his hands on lots and lots of brand-name candy. Madonna, a blond star, wrote about a pretty little blond girl who has no friends because everyone is jealous that she "shines like a star." And Britney, a younger blond singer, wrote a book, with her mother, about a young blond girl who really, really wants to become a singer.

Everyone agreed there was lots of money and publicity to be made in kid lit. It was a time, after all, when a young British woman -- who didn't have a famous name when she started -- wrote a series of books about a boy named Harry and, legend has it, became richer than Madonna, and richer, even, than the Queen of England. Joanne Kathleen Rowling was interviewed on television and mobbed by adoring fans. The movies made from her books were hailed as a franchise.

Publishers were excited. Over the years they had signed up the likes of Bill Cosby, Jimmy Buffett and Sarah Ferguson, the Duchess of York, as children's book authors. Then the floodgates opened. Soon children's bookstores were as studded with stars and has-been stars as "Hollywood Squares," with titles by Spike Lee, Keith Hernandez, Jesse Ventura, Jerry Seinfeld, Britney Spears, Maria Shriver, Katie Couric, Marlee Matlin, Bob Dylan, Dr. Laura Schlessinger, LeAnn Rimes, Jane Seymour, Harvey Fierstein, Della Reese, Michael Bolton and Debbie Allen jostling for shelf space. Madonna and Lynne Cheney, who is married to the vice president, are the latest celebrities to join the crowd. Their books -- respectively, "The English Roses" and "A Is for Abigail" -- made best-seller lists.

A handful of celebrities, like John Lithgow and Jamie Lee Curtis, actually have a gift for writing for children: they know how to tell a story and how to tell it with words and pictures and whimsical wit. For others, children's books are just another way to merchandise themselves,

another vanity production: Britney books, along with Britney dolls, Britney cellphones and Britney mouse pads.

Instead of creating imaginary worlds or engaging fictional characters, many celebrities just riff about themselves. Cindy Crawford has filled her book "About Face" with pictures of herself and her son. And Shaquille O'Neal has given his younger self a starring role in fairy tales like "Little Red Riding Hood" and "Goldilocks and the Three Bears." (At least he has a sense of humor: he has cast himself as Little Red and Goldilocks, not as the Big Bad Wolf or Papa Bear.)

Other celebrities seem to think they can use children's books to reinvent their images or jump-start a stalled career. Madonna became a children's author after her movie "Swept Away" failed to sweep anyone away. Spike Lee became a children's author when he said he was finding it increasingly difficult to get money to make his movies. And Ms. Cheney began publishing children's books when, as second lady, she exchanged her image as a combative veteran of the culture wars for the more traditional role of political wife.

The problem was that these authors counted on audiences being able to forget -- or ignore -- who they used to be. "Please, baby, please," the title of the book Spike Lee wrote with his wife Tonya Lewis Lee, was a famous line, used in a very different context, from his raunchy 1986 comedy, "She's Gotta Have It." And Madonna's previous venture into publishing was "Sex" -- a 1992 book that celebrated exhibitionism, bondage, bisexuality and group sex.

The subtext of "Sex" was essentially sadomasochistic: that all relationships are about power and control. Her new book, "Roses," Madonna has said in interviews, strives to impart the Cabala-inspired wisdom that when we disconnect from the "one life-giving force in the world," we "bring chaos and pain and suffering into our lives."

As for Ms. Cheney's new book, "A Is for Abigail: An Almanac of Amazing American Women," it stands in jarring contrast to her earlier censures of feminism. A page on writers, for instance, features the name of Alice Walker and a drawing of Toni Morrison, even though Ms. Cheney, in her former capacity as chairwoman of the National Endowment for the Humanities, once pushed for the nomination of Carol Iannone to the endowment's advisory council. Ms Iannone, a literature professor, had written that awarding prestigious prizes to black writers like Ms. Morrison and Ms. Walker sacrificed "the demands of excellence to the democratic dictatorship of mediocrity."

Although Ms. Cheney has often denounced multiculturalism and political correctness, her children's books, "A Is for Abigail" and "America: A Patriotic Primer," are illustrated with pictures of people of many different colors. Madonna's "Roses" similarly features drawings of a rainbow quartet of girls: a blonde, a redhead, an African-American and an Asian.

In retelling several famous folk tales, Shaquille O'Neal's "Shaq and the Beanstalk and Other Very Tall Tales" also tries to take a politically correct approach to violence, awkwardly trying to

reconcile the Grimm-ness of the original tales with a gentler perspective. Before knocking out an angry giant with a golden basketball, the hero pauses to deliver a finger-wagging aside: "I have always believed that fighting is the loser's way out. You get nowhere using violence. It's always better to talk your problems out."

Many celebrities serve up similarly well-meaning but trite lessons in their children's books, hoping perhaps to emulate the success of William J. Bennett's best seller, "The Children's Book of Virtues." Katie Couric's "Brand New Kid" delivers the message that kids should reach out to the new boy at school. Keith Hernandez's "First-Base Hero" tells the reader that everyone makes mistakes and that it is important to persevere. And Julie Andrews Edwards's book, "Dumpy and the Firefighters," preaches that everyone can make a valuable contribution to the community.

While such morals are certainly worthy ones, they are no substitute for real storytelling, a craft many celebrities seem to think can be picked up overnight in between their real-life gigs. Other celebrity books do not even promote worthwhile lessons. In Madonna's book a clique of cool girls considers the beautiful Binah a sadly deprived child because she has only one doll and lots of books and has to perform unheard of chores like setting the table and emptying the trash. "The English Roses couldn't believe their eyes," Madonna writes. "They had never seen a girl work so hard in their lives. 'She reminds me of Cinderella,' said Amy."

Jerry Seinfeld's "Halloween" has an even more offensive message: greed is good and rudeness is funny. His hero, an obnoxious brat, spurns some of the trick-or-treat candy he has received with snarky disdain: "Do me a favor, you keep that one," he tells an old woman who has given him an orange marshmallow treat. "We've got all the doorstops we need already, thank you very much. We're going for NAME CANDY ONLY this year."

As for the branding of children's literature with celebrity names, the fad shows no signs of flagging. Madonna has four more children's books on the way. The next, "Mr. Peabody's Apples," is due out on Nov. 10. Jay Leno and the football playing twins Tiki and Ronde Barber reportedly have children's books in the works as well.

So far Joanne Kathleen Rowling -- never mind the Grimm brothers and Dr. Seuss -- faces little serious competition in the children's book business, at least not from the celebrities who covet her celebrity and underestimate the difficulty of her art.

Photos: Celebrities -- from pop stars to basketball players to film directors -- are stepping beyond their normal realms to take a crack at writing children's books, but the art of storytelling can be elusive. (pg. E5); Literary ambition: Madonna has written "The English Roses." (Photo by Reuters)(pg. E1)