

2004/Nov MEG CABOT - Publishing News

The days are long gone when Meggin Cabot had to write under almost a full poker hand of pseudonyms just to make ends meet. She's just plain Meg Cabot now and, because of the phenomenal success of *The Princess Diaries*, she doesn't have to keep up a punishing schedule that, at one point, had her pumping out a book a month and racking up a total of 35 books in four years. "When I first started out I was trying to sell as much as I could and I signed exclusive contracts with particular names, so I just kept inventing new names as I got new contracts. But I've stopped doing that now...and I've stopped writing the very smutty books I didn't want my Grandma to find out about!"

It was, she says, a horrible period of her life - with no time off for good behaviour as she also had a full-time job as an assistant dormitory manager at New York University. "The job had periods where it was really slow, so I did just write all day and no one cared; but I'm glad that I don't do that any more. I *love* writing, but I was miserable during that time...[in the end] it worked, because my name got out there and now people are buying the books and I don't have to write so many to support myself. Actually, I'm finding myself - even though I don't have to - still writing books on the side, just for fun because it is my hobby, and when I have time off, that's what I like to do."

Cabot is actually a Fine Arts major who originally went to New York to find fame and fortune as an illustrator. "I had wanted to be an English major, but when I was 16 a guy at the college I was going to go to said 'If you want to be a writer, *do not*, under *any* circumstance, major in Creative Writing or Journalism because they will stamp out any love for fiction that you have', and I believed him, I was terrified. As I always liked to draw, I decided to do that as it wouldn't stamp out my love of writing." Years later, Cabot met the man again in New York; they are now married, and he never did become a writer.

Cabot realised her life was going to change the day the cheque arrived from Disney, marking the start of shooting on *Princess Diaries*, which was

even before the book had been published. The mark of a good agent? “Yes, she’s very good...I had looked for an agent for years - that’s the hardest part of this business - and in fact I was the first client she took on on her first day. We did well by each other.” Oddly enough, Cabot’s US editor had just started at HarperCollins and *Princess Diaries* was the first title she’d ever bought. “It was a one-book deal, but I was thrilled, of course. When it became a movie, she got promoted and bought more books!”

Having hit the big time in the city that never sleeps, Cabot has recently moved to Key West in Florida - land of hurricanes, and no state or local taxes for residents - from where she continues to write teen fiction, connecting with her audience in an extraordinarily direct way. “I get so many e-mails and letters from the girls, all my references are continually updated,” she says, admitting that writing totally current fiction can have its drawbacks. “In fact book six, *Sixational*, is already out of date as it refers to a TV show where two characters have never slept together, and they just did, so I had to call my US publisher - change the line before the book comes out!”

Unusually, *Sixational* has published here before the US; not a huge problem, you might think, but this is the age of the Internet, of websites and chatrooms. “It’s causing me *untold* amounts of headaches, they’re buying [the book] on the web and all the little American girls are logging onto my book club - which has 4,500 members - and going to the message board to ask the English girls what happens. I’ve had to hire somebody to go on to the site and get rid of all those messages, but after this one, all the books are coming out the same time, worldwide.”

Cabot, who is a vision in pink (which includes pale cerise cowboy boots), writes about the minutiae, the finer points, the ins and the outs and the trivia of teen existence - all in an eerily accurate voice, with lots of CAPITALS! to help describe the angst and emotions engendered by boyfriends, the lack of them, and other stuff of pre-adult life. Plus the trouble caused by being the heir to the throne of Genovia. But one thing her books very definitely aren’t is issue-based.

“In America, I don’t know about here, the Young Adult market is full of all these books that are really heavy and depressing and,” she whispers, “‘*my dad molested me*’ and stuff like that. I just feel so many of my readers have those problems, so I’m trying to show them that you can read books that are fun, *escape* literature.” There is a feeling, as an adult reading what her central character Mia Thermopolis has to say, that you’re eavesdropping, and, says Cabot, it’s just that voyeuristic quality her audience loves. “The reason the girls are drawn to the books is an element of naughtiness - ooh, I’m reading something that’s not supposed to be read.” Would she ever write a book from a boy’s perspective? “Oh god no! I could never, I have *no* idea where to start!”

If you needed any more convincing of quite how well *The Princess Diaries* have done, other than the millions of books the series has sold, the fact that there’s already been one hit movie, plus a recently released follow-up, is proof positive of Cabot’s stellar position. What did she think of Hollywood’s efforts? “It’s weird, really strange to see how somebody else perceives your characters, but it’s kind of cool...they did a really good job, even though they changed stuff; they explained they had to kill the dad to give Julie Andrews more lines! I tell the readers they have to look at the movies almost as fan fiction.”

Cabot says she’s a baby-step person, one small step at a time, “...it was, *if* I could get an agent...*if* could just get published...*if* I could have a book tour.” So what’s the next baby step? “A pool, I need my own pool...and as far as career stuff goes, I’m happy doing what I’m doing, writing for young adults. And I’ve been *very* inspired by the trip to England.” Could Mia marry an English prince? Only time will tell.