

Sanderson, Catherine

PETITE ANGLAISE:

A True Story

Spiegel & Grau (304 pp.)

\$24.95

Jun. 17, 2008

ISBN: 978-0-385-52280-9

Expat in Paris creates a blog that ends up dramatically altering her humdrum life.

Debut memoirist Sanderson hadn't even heard of blogs until the *Guardian* ran a feature on the popular Belle de Jour, a blogger who wrote about her life as a high-class call girl. Fascinated, the author decided that starting her own Internet diary could be the perfect distraction from her frustrations with a dead-end job, a lusterless relationship and a dwindling social life as the mother of a toddler. Using the nom-de-Web "Petite Anglaise," she began writing anecdotes about her adopted city with a fish-out-of-water slant. Soon she moved on to the emotional terrain of work, boyfriend—referred to as "Mr. Frog"—and their daughter, "Tadpole"; her emotional candor and unflinching honesty quickly gained her an active following. Sanderson began to meet some of her fellow bloggers and readers, setting a precedent for blurring the line between Internet existence and reality. After one date and one tryst in a hotel with "Jim in Rennes," she fell in love and overturned her life for him, breaking up with Mr. Frog and pursuing a relationship with a man who knew her primarily through her blog persona. That persona was a braver, more self-assured version of her actual self, Sanderson notes, and it was decidedly unnerving when her blog readers' postings speculated about her life in terms that suggested it was a story whose plot lines could be changed. The author's intense honesty is a double-edged sword here. Placing her insecurities in the foreground and highlighting selfish concerns in extreme emotional detail, she often comes across as narcissistic and impulsive. But her seamless, dramatically paced narration reads beautifully, and her ear for dialogue is excellent. Evocative descriptions of Paris are an added plus.

Soap-operatic navel-gazing in engaging prose. (Agent: Zoe Pagnamenta/PFD New York)

Schwarz, Ted

CANDY BARR:

*The Small-Town Texas**Runaway Who Became a**Darling of the Mob and the**Queen of Las Vegas Burlesque*

Taylor (304 pp.)

\$24.95

Jul. 1, 2008

ISBN: 978-1-59077-126-6

Veteran true-crime/entertainment scribe Schwarz (*Hollywood Confidential: How the Studios Beat the Mob at Their Own Game*, 2007, etc.) charts the lurid life and times of a stripper.

The burlesque star notorious for her association with Jack Ruby and mob boss Mickey Cohen was born Juanita Slusher to impoverished parents in a small Texas town. A precociously attractive child, she was regularly abused and molested by a string of neighbors and family members. (In a particularly horrific passage, Schwarz describes eight-year-old Juanita being put up as the jackpot in a pedophile poker game.) She ran away from home in her early teens, settling in Dallas. There she immediately fell prey to "the Capture," a tradition in which, Schwarz informs us, young girls were kidnapped, systematically raped and forced into prostitution, catering to the hypocritical Dallas establishment. After suffering in this role for a period, Juanita somehow managed to carve out a career as "Candy Barr," a burlesque dancer whose act was so transporting that she became the toast of Las Vegas and attracted Cohen's attention. Schwarz clearly presents this sensational material, but the book is one-dimensional. The endless litany of kidnappings, murder attempts, conspiracies, drug arrests, prison and rape after rape is hard to stomach and, after a while, hard to completely believe. Readers may raise eyebrows over the author's unquestioning acceptance of Barr's muddled, often half-remembered saga; they surely will wonder about his characterization of her as a brilliant artist. Quoted at length, she comes across as a rough-edged survivor and a self-mythologizer. Schwarz has written a compelling, upsetting screed against society's depraved exploitation of an innocent, but it lacks the rigor necessary for full-scale biography and social history.

A punishing read, filled with righteous anger and fuzzy on details.

Seymour, Miranda

THRUMPTON HALL:

*A Memoir of Life in My**Father's House*

Harper/HarperCollins

(288 pp.)

\$24.95

Jul. 1, 2008

ISBN: 978-0-06-146656-4

Seymour (*The Bugatti Queen: In Search of a Motor-Racing Legend*, 2004, etc.) recalls her idiosyncratic father and the unbreakable bond he formed with his country estate.

Located in Nottinghamshire, Thrumpton Hall once belonged to Lord Byron. Young George Seymour, who spent a year there with his childless aunt and uncle when his parents were dispatched to a diplomatic post in Bolivia, was the first child to have lived there in 300 years. Though the Byrons never suggested he would inherit it, the boy vowed Thrumpton Hall would one day belong to him. His daughter's lively recollection of George's love affair with the house includes candid reflections on the trials of taking over such a grandiose building, as well as some beautifully descriptive details. Her chronicle of young George's discovery of the Hall's hidden spaces, shown to him by a kindly electrician in 1927, is among the book's many highlights. But the real interest lies in Seymour's account of her parents' relations with their daughter and each other. She wonders whether her father married her wealthy mother for the money. Their engagement occurred as the Byrons were considering selling Thrumpton Hall, and later in life George formed close, possibly homosexual bonds with two local men. The author speculates on her father's overwhelming fondness for these characters, which included sharing beds with them. She records some strained remarks on the topic from her mother but doesn't draw any firm conclusions. Interjections from the guarded but always beguiling Rosemary Scott Ellis Seymour make a lively addition to the text; she seems to be constantly looking over her daughter's shoulder as Seymour writes, offering a crusty running commentary. The story takes a sad turn toward the end, as George's obsession with his house is ultimately overshadowed by an even greater fixation on the ill-fated Robbie.

Creatively and entertainingly written family memoir. (Agent: Anthony Goff/David Higham Associates)