

The New York Times

ON THE WEB

Black Writers Seize Glamorous Ground Around 'Chick-Lit'

By LOLA OGUNNAIKE

Published: May 31, 2004



It prompted viewers across the country to plunk down hundreds for Manolo Blahniks, convinced them that gold nameplates and giant silk flowers were must-have accessories and proved, time and time again, that nirvana could be found in an eight-ounce cosmo. But for a few African-American women HBO's series "Sex and the City" had a more profound and wholly unexpected effect: it motivated them to write fiction.

"I loved that show, but when you watched, it was as if the only people in New York living fabulous lives were 30-something-year-old white women, and that's a complete fallacy," said Lyah Beth LeFlore, a 34-year-old television producer and co-author of "Cosmopolitan Girls," a breezy novel about two African-American women in search of love, designer pumps and the perfect martini. "There are a lot of amazing black women living interesting, glamorous lives, and it was time our stories be told."

Published in February and in its second printing, "Cosmopolitan Girls" (Harlem Moon/Doubleday) by Ms. LeFlore and Charlotte Burley is one in a clutch of Manhattan-based novels about black women living high-octane lives. "The Accidental Diva," released this month, looks at the glittering lipstick-and-lashes life of a black beauty editor. "Bling," due in June with an initial printing of 125,000 copies, is set in the flashy urban music industry, while "Gotham Diaries," due in July and already set for a second printing after an initial run of 100,000 copies, delves into the gilded world of New York's African-American elite. More books in this vein, like "Fab," about a group of upwardly mobile black women in the city, will be in bookstores by early next spring.

Six years after Helen Fielding's "Bridget Jones's Diary" established the genre that has come to be known as chick-lit — and just in time for beach-book season — black chick-lit appears to have arrived. While the books are aimed at African-Americans, the publishers and authors hope to score a crossover success with white readers of chick-lit.

Like its white counterpart, black chick-lit often centers on single women with dream jobs, precariously balancing the personal and professional. Similarly, too, these new authors write with insiders' knowledge about the glamorous worlds they chronicle.

Neither racially charged nor didactic, these books seem meant to be read on sandy shores from Sag Harbor to St.-Tropez. The protagonists, educated and decidedly middle to upper class, effortlessly mingle with both black and white characters. Love, not privilege, is the only real speed bump.

"There is no momma figure acting as the conscience; spirituality is not at the core of these books," said Patrik Henry Bass, books editor at Essence, the leading African-American women's magazine. "You won't find any church scenes."

Tonya Lewis Lee, who along with a friend, Crystal McCrary Anthony, wrote "Gotham Diaries" (Hyperion), said, "We didn't want our book to be heavy." Set against a backdrop of museum galas and million-dollar real estate deals, the novel delights in skewering nouveau riche rappers and pearl-clutching socialites alike. "We need levity somewhere," said Mrs. Lee, wife of the director Spike Lee. "We need to be able to laugh at ourselves."

While critics might argue that some of the authors should have expended a little more effort honing the craft and a little less swiping the Amex card, Matt Campbell, the head buyer of African-American fiction for Waldenbooks, said the books would find readers. The market for contemporary black fiction is booming, Mr. Campbell said, adding, "In the past two years alone, sales at our stores have grown 25 percent each year."

According to Target Market News, a research company that specializes in African-American consumer statistics, blacks spent \$325 million on books in 2003, an 8 percent increase over 2002. In 1996 the figure was a little more than \$200 million.

"Once these black women readers realize that these books are out there, they will really catch on, and they're going to be big," said Janet Hill, vice president and executive editor of Harlem Moon, which besides "Cosmopolitan Girls" has published "Beautylicious: The Black Girl's Guide to the Fabulous Life."

"We think that there is a very healthy market for African-American chick-lit, and we plan to capitalize on it," she added.