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Chick lit, sistah style

In a new crop of novels, the African American women aren't just wisecracking sidekicks.

By Dwayne Campbell
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Destiny Day, party planner to New York's music glitterati, totes Chanel and Gucci bags and struts her stuff in three-inch Jimmy Choos. She's got money in the bank, a few well-connected players to have fun with, and a heart that finds true love when least expected.

Day is the high-rolling sistah in *Last Night a DJ Saved My Life* by Lyah Beth LeFlore (Harlem Moon/Broadway Books, \$12.95), one of this season's new crop of "chick lit" books where the divas are black and beautiful, the men - whether in "slightly sagging" \$200 jeans or Armani suits - are 6-foot-2 and gorgeous, and their glamorous lives collide in glamorous places such as MObar in Manhattan and star-studded Hamptons soirees.

It used to be that these modern-day, easy-read romantic novels were the stories of cute Caucasian women conquering big-city life. But in recent years, books such as *Cosmopolitan Girls*, LeFlore's 2004 novel with coauthor Charlotte Burley, as well as her latest tome, come with black or Latina protagonists who are far removed from "tough life, hard luck" heroines of earlier genres.

This crop of characters are city-savvy, successful, no-nonsense women who work hard and party with the likes of P. Diddy. And, LeFlore says, they do exist.

"When *Cosmopolitan Girls* came out, that's when the literary world opened their eyes and said, 'There are black women living chick-lit lives,' " said LeFlore, who will be signing her new book at Zanzibar Blue on Monday.

"We have been fabulous since the beginning of time," added LeFlore, who parlayed her just-out-of-college Nickelodeon job into a TV-production career. "That story was just not being told in *Sex and the City*, in Jennifer Weiner books, and *The Devil Wears Prada*. Black women identify with the characters because they are living these lives, too."

The breezy books about these formerly unseen black women are finding a receptive audience, many of them women who had read *Bridget Jones's Diary* (and seen the movie) and were yearning to find themselves in similar novels.

"If you go back and look at the genre, you'll find the Danielle Steel and Jackie Collins books, and later Terry McMillan added color," said Janet Hill, vice president and executive editor of Harlem Moon. "These books are often humorous and a little bit lighter... younger women identify with the characters and there is also the factor of escapism."

Divas adorned in Lagerfeld and Louboutin have starred in Erica Kennedy's *Bling*, Tonya Lewis Lee and Crystal McCrary Anthony's *Gotham Diaries*, Donna Hill's *Divas, Inc.*, and Tia Williams' *The Accidental Diva*.

Williams, a former beauty editor at magazines such as Lucky, Elle and Glamour, and beauty director at Teen People, left magazines in May last year to focus on her writing career. She didn't consciously set out to write black chick lit.

"I simply wanted to tell the story of me and my friends, black girls in the so-called glamour professions," Williams said via e-mail. "It was a story that hadn't been told before, and I felt it was time. We're not always the sassy best friend in white novels, or long-suffering, my-man-done-me-wrong characters in street lit."

Williams, who also cohosts Cosmopolitan magazine's *Cosmo Radio* morning show on Sirius, has a second chick-lit novel (no title yet) and a young adult book, tentatively titled *The It Chicks*, scheduled for publication next year.

Although popular, the genre receives some of the same criticisms leveled at street lit; mainly, that the stories are formulaic.

"There is a reliable, steady market out there and a lot of publishing houses are putting books into that market... but they are not necessarily taking risks," said Charlotte Abbott, a senior editor at Publishers Weekly. "It's harder to come up with something different."

The authors say, however, there are more stories to be told about the blinged-out lives of successful young black women (who work mostly in music, fashion, entertainment or public relations) balancing life, love and fabulousness.

In *Last Night a DJ Saved My Life*, Destiny Day is hoping to find Mr. Right while maintaining a sense of independence. At 35, she is getting pressure from family who see her life as a bit flawed and unsettled.

LeFlore, 36, could fit part of her real life into her juicy book. Now living in L.A., she won't name names, but says some people from her New York days have called and joked about scenes they believe are familiar.

After graduating from Stephens College in 1991, the St. Louis native snagged a job as assistant to the vice president for programming at Nickelodeon TV channel in New York City.

That led to other gigs in the music and TV industries. LeFlore became director of development at Andre Harrell's Uptown Entertainment, and helped develop the Fox TV show *New York Undercover*; at age 24, she became an associate producer of the then-popular drama.

At Uptown, LeFlore was in the thick of the Manhattan lifestyle she references in *Last Night*. In the early 1990s, young African Americans were taking off in the entertainment industry as hip-hop and R&B collided with film and TV. New songs were becoming million-dollar sellers, networks were looking for black content, and new stars were being made every day.

"We were working with artists like Heavy D, Jodeci and Christopher Williams," LeFlore recalled. "We all had director or v.p. titles, and I don't think anyone was 30 years old. You'd go from development meetings all day to the hottest nightclubs."

Those vibrant days and nights have been fodder for LeFlore ever since. The "N" network is considering LeFlore's latest project, *Reece in the House*, about a young, black, Midwestern girl working at a hot hip-hop fashion house in New York (and how she adjusts to big city life).

LeFlore, who is divorced, says the glammed-up version of chick lit isn't just about wearing designer clothes, dating a music mogul and downing Veuve Cliquot.

In the end, she says, the book is about a woman who has a tough public persona but is discovering herself and looking for true love while balancing life and work.

"We get so caught up in having our game face on, sometimes we forget to show our real face," LeFlore said. "I had gotten to a point when even talking to my family, it was like doing a business deal. My own family had to

put me in check. They said if you have a dollar or a million dollars, you are still Lyah Beth."

Still, LeFlore wants to be clear that there are ways to be grounded while living the high life, and African American women shouldn't apologize for their high-end trappings.

"There are black women out there who won't wear anything but Cavalli, but they work hard to afford these luxuries," LeFlore said. "Whether it's in Jimmy Choo or Chanel or a fabulous knockoff, there is nothing wrong with strutting your stuff."

If You Go

Author Lyah Beth LeFlore will be signing copies of her book *Last Night a DJ Saved My Life* at 5:30 p.m. Monday at Zanzibar Blue, Broad and Walnut Streets.

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