

Front page to front line

I'M A CELEBRITY JOURNALIST GET ME OUT OF HERE!

Jane Bussmann explains why hunting down child-kidnappers in Uganda became preferable to a life interviewing Britney, Paris and co in Hollywood

I CAN PINPOINT THE MOMENT IT STARTED: SPRINGTIME, 2003, and I was having lunch in Beverly Hills with the most fancied man in America. It was an intimate lunch outside a hilltop cafe, and I was gazing into the eyes of Ashton Kutcher, the actor who would soon be known as the bloke who took over from Bruce Willis on Demi Moore.

It's a rule when talking to famous people – never bring up religion, they might have an opinion. But I'd run out of things to ask him. This happened a lot when I talked to celebrities. I'd already done his favourite blended coffee drink, phone handset and trainers. Within seconds, he'd explained that he was religious but didn't go to church, for a reason.

'I'd rather hang out with someone who doesn't have my beliefs,' he said, 'and then maybe make them think about theirs.' But... Then he means... 'So, could you convert me?' I said. He asked me my ►

« anything you saw today, we are not going there. » I swear her front bum snarled at me.

I was going to crack up if I didn't find a way to handle L.A. In the end, the solution came from the celebrities themselves. I learned from the stars that you don't have to play the game. Notice in the shot of me and Mischa Barton (previous page), I'm the one trying not to be recognised. 'Got any favourite places in L.A.?' I asked her.

'I don't like to have opinions,' Barton said, 'because I'm young and you never know how it comes across.'

'You're absolutely right.'

I knew how I was going to handle L.A.: I was going to behave far, far worse than the people around me. There was a thrill in being the most terrible employee of all time. Lying, cheating, stealing, raiding minibars, daring them to expel me, I lived by one rule: write nice things.

By day, I dealt with Spears's publicity firm. By night, as an antidote, I started Googling real dramas – the sickest, most messed-up wars on the planet. The search took me to Angola, Sierra Leone, Liberia. In my idle daydreams I'd be out there, using the remaining shreds of my brain to expose something that didn't involve chihuahuas. Fuck it. I'd have a crack at being Kate Adie. A foreign correspondent. How hard could it be to get on a plane bound for Africa and ask maniacs if they'd committed genocide? Did I do anything about this ambition? Not as such. Instead, I mostly

daydreamed and ate a lot of frozen yogurt.

Then one day I got a phone call, and not merely from a random psycho PR. It was Hollywood's premier litigation lawyer. If I tell you his nickname is Mad Dog, you have some idea of how much I was crapping myself. His client, Ashton Kutcher, was 'very upset' about a Demi Moore quote that had been attributed to him. Suffice to say, Kutcher hadn't said it, I hadn't written it, it had still been published, and if this was the way things were going in celebrity culture, it was time for me to get the hell out. A war zone looked like a sensible alternative.

I huddled myself on the internet looking for a new life, preferably in front-line Liberia. The answer came during a marathon research session – I'd read literally pages of *Vanity Fair* – when I saw a picture of a man called John Prendergast, a leading expert in conflict resolution. Talk about the antidote to



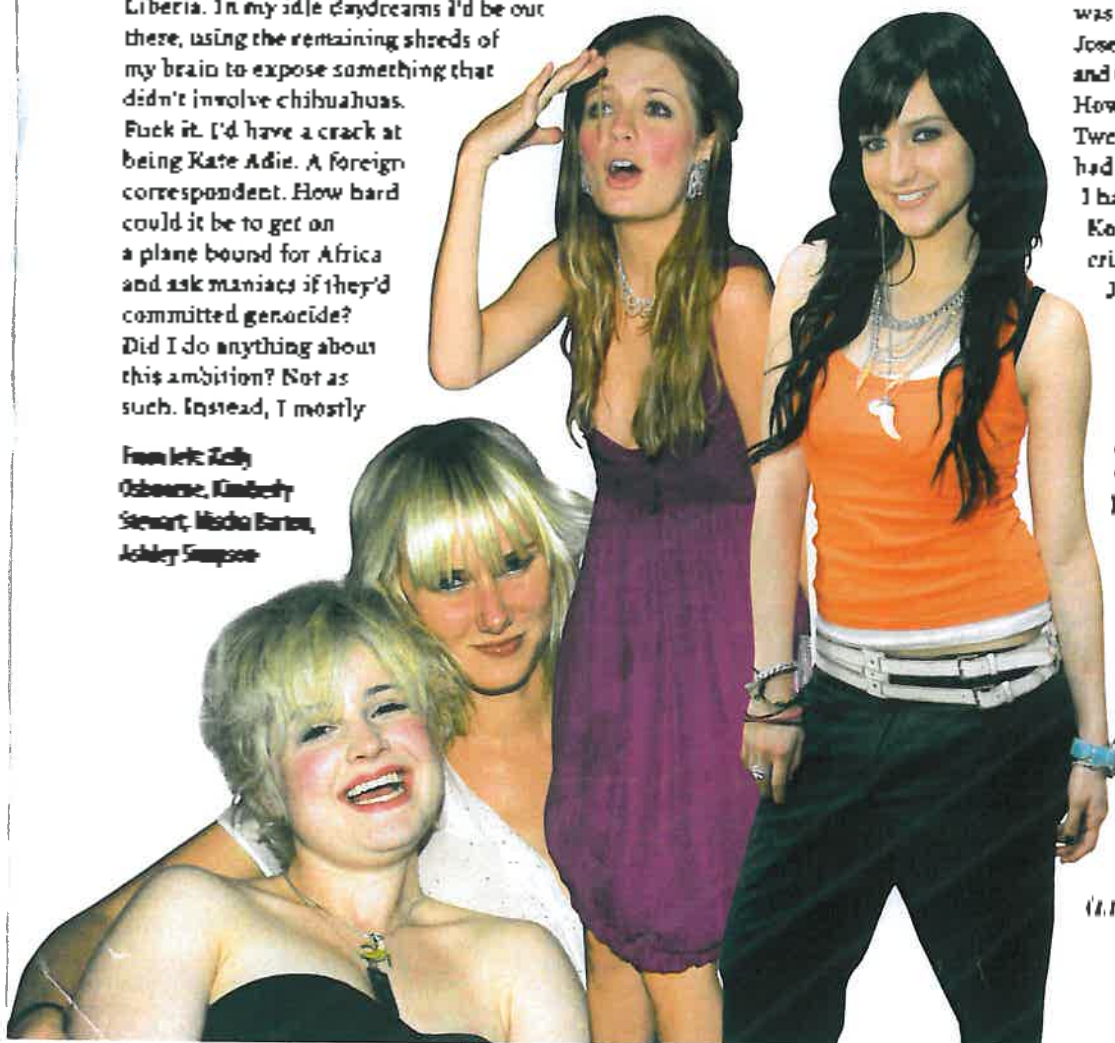
Busmann in Uganda

I'd have a crack at being Kate Adie

writing about how much Paris Hilton paid for a handbag – this man ended wars for a living. This was the kind of person who deserved to be a celebrity. And Prendergast was going on a mission: he was flying to Uganda to bait a trap for Joseph Kony, a man who kidnapped kids and turned them into sex slaves and soldiers. How many kids had Kony abducted? Twenty thousand. And in 20 years no one had stopped him – an incredible story I had no choice but to wrap Hollywood. Kony was committing an unspeakable crime in Africa, and, more to the point, John Prendergast was going to be there.

So somehow, a few months later, I found myself standing in a freshly dug grave in remote Africa. There was a giant colonel looking over me, and a body at my feet they claimed was one of Joseph Kony's child kidnapping rebel commanders. With barely any qualifications apart from: A level art, I was accidently intera trying to work out who was the bad guy. I'm still not sure how I got there. But, I think, was the colonel. ■
June is performing the night stage show of Busmann's Holiday

The Worst Date Ever at this year's Ballinagh Festival, 28-30 August. For tickets, contact 021 923 3110, assemblyfestival.com. The Worst Date Ever by Jane Busmann (€11.99, Busmann) is out on 4 July



From left: Kelly Osborne, Kimberly Stewart, Mischa Barton, Ashley Simpson



Jane, left, walks and talks with Mischa Barton

movies, and I hadn't thought to check if they already had writers. The only job I could do was interviewing celebrities.

This was the Golden Age of Stupid, and Hollywood was peaking: 2003-2006 in Los Angeles was 1966-1969 in London, without cool music, cool movies or people who did anything. This time in history was unhinged - the peak of celebrity culture, when all eyes were on Paris Hilton's wrong end, and while no one was looking, George Bush's government produced a tube of fake anthrax as evidence that we should spend \$3 trillion dollars bombing Iraq. If you questioned this, you were the crazy one. We were headed for Armageddon, and all I was doing about it was writing "Mischa Barton is a free spirit with a work ethic" before falling face down in a bucket of frozen yogurt every night.

Every weekend, *Rose Strain* was stalked by mannequins *floating between the Skybar and The Standard* with

painted legs and no pubic hair. I know this, because this generation didn't burn bras, it spurned knickers.

Eventually, I was summoned to spend a day in the life of Nicole Richie for a women's magazine. The angle: *Look How Nice And Thin Nicole Is Now. The summer story was 'Swimwear', gearing up for the winter story: 'Stop Eating All That Food Or You'll Never Get Into Your Swimwear'.* We were on hip Sunset Plaza Drive, in the Tracey Ross boutique, where a starlet could shed pounds of ugly money buying bracelets made from old string.

My interviewee stepped out of the changing room. After *The Simple Life*, Richie went stellar, a subversive new personality. But that wasn't enough for Hollywood, and she had been taken under the wing of a Hollywood player - the stylist. Richie looked amazing. At least, that's what I wrote; I have no idea whether she did or not. She was freshly fatless and sprayed brown, so she looked healthy at least. (Why did I write this? Because Hollywood is controlled by about five publicists. Write anything bad -

« Nicole, Miss? The people are
basically here... Not?
But with that? He said, Oh, so you're
reigning again? Charles Darwin?
What have I done? He's going to
see my own beliefs again as I'm not
going to apologise for being a robot.
So, so? Epologized.
I'll be in some time somewhere
rightly. No why, so-called that night, power
that; he said, "This is the life of it, right?
No it's God, you believe in God."
I wanted out, right now. So, I'm taking
his name for happiness. I said, "I just
don't like potential. Gregg? Marjorie?"
He almost at me. "So, can you
have you met?" he asked.
"I... A dozen?"
"I met some really great people
two. But I've only met four people.
No, three people. No, four people.
I've met five people and three of
them were great..."
I changed the subject to try to
lighten the mood. It didn't work.
"One of them will make me
a hot holiday card," he said. "You know,
I'll leave it open to your judgement,
but I think you need to think about
your thinking a little bit more."
Here's what I wrote: "Anytime
really in the custom pattern in
Assante." Now, I take full
responsibility for finding myself
in this terrible situation. I've moved
to Hollywood from the UK to write

All eyes were on Paris's wrong end



From left: the Olsen twins, Paris Hilton, P Diddy, Ashton Kutcher

about their clients and you'll never work again.) By the following summer, when I interviewed her again - the angle: *Look How Far-Too-Thin Nicole Is Now* - I wrote, 'Nicole is not emaciated.'

I hoped Richie wouldn't die. She was witty and friendly, with a nice smile - world-weary but still amused. Like Dolly Parton, Richie was in on the airhead joke. Her excuse for arriving 40 minutes late was, 'Sorry, I crashed my car again.' Yes, Richie was great, but boy, did she have a cavalcade in her wake. Fixers, groomers, random beds - and leading them all, stylist-to-the-stars, Rachel Zoe herself, hovering over Richie like a moth-eaten crow.

'Oh my God, everybody, stop what you're doing and see how cute she looks!' bellowed one of the cavalcade. The Crow had transformed Richie into a child prostitute with a tattooist.

'How did you meet Rachel?' I asked Richie, but before she could answer, Zoe swooped.

'I helped her choose an outfit for Oprah and we fell in love,' Zoe said, staring me straight in the eye with no hint of humor. 'The clothes we chose got "Look of the Week" in *US Weekly* magazine.'

'How much does that cost, "Look of the Week"?' I said.

'A Fendi or Marc Jacobs purse is \$1,500 to \$3,000, Oscar de la Renta cocktail

dress, several thousand. The free samples don't fit Nicole, she's a straight size zero. 34-in waist,' said Zoe.

On the floor of the photo studio, I found a picture book about the Taliban, somehow stocked alongside all the Kabbalah literature. Richie picked up the book, but Zoe snatched it away. 'No, Nicole! It might look political,' she scolded, glaring at me for trying to damage her client. I could feel my mental stability wobbling.

'I was driving across town when my phone rang. We're thinking of going with Geri Halliwell and her breast cancer fears,' said the editor.

'She's got breast cancer?'

'No, she just fears it.'

Call waiting. Another editor. 'What are you going to ask Britney?' I was clinging harder than usual to sanity because I was cruising to Culver City to interview Britney Spears. I'd had my brief from the editor. We want some of the pain she's been through, but a positive

Richie was in on the airhead joke



From left, Lindsay Lohan; Britney Spears; stylist Rachel Zoe; Nicole Richie

spin that she's back and beautiful again.'

I turned into Smashbox Studios. I could see Britney Spears in the make-up room. Her hair looked exactly like left insulation, but in four hours a hairstylist would have rubbed \$20-worth of spray wax into it and it would be as glossy as the Cadillacs outside.

I strolled into the photo studio. Pretend it's a cafe I've come to eat some brownies. I could see them: fresh and smelling of butter. Oh my God, they're not just brownies, they're liquid-centre tortes - nnnhh... One thing was going to make my day better but, as always, a depressed assistant had spotted the cake first. We steamed towards the table. It was neck and neck, but someone headed me off.

'Excuse me, who are you?' said a voice. It was a publicist, and not a junior one.

'I'm the journalist who's interviewing Britney after the shoot,' I beamed, sitting down to make myself harder to shift.

'We weren't told you were coming,' she snapped.

'The New York office told me in a...!' The New York office was a way of saying 'Your boss, brownie!'

'No, they didn't!'

'I've got them all!'

'I don't know anything about it!' I was clearly annoyed that I would admit to mental illness at this point, but

something dawned on me. Britney understood. The look for today was subtle, but more than to Richie. Richie had had that expert eye on appeal, to report that she'd be going to wrap away her public image, to remain as a woman in a black tank top. She'd wear a necklace of red

stones. Her assistants were obedient, and not just from obediently obedient. It had had done it again. The publicist must have seen it. The media and my eye

dawned. I couldn't stop the flow of my report. I think it occurred to her that 'I'm the journalist who's interviewing Britney after the shoot' was now no longer an abstract phrase, but a concrete reality. She was now a part of the history of the event, and not just a member of the media. And it

SHELF LIFE

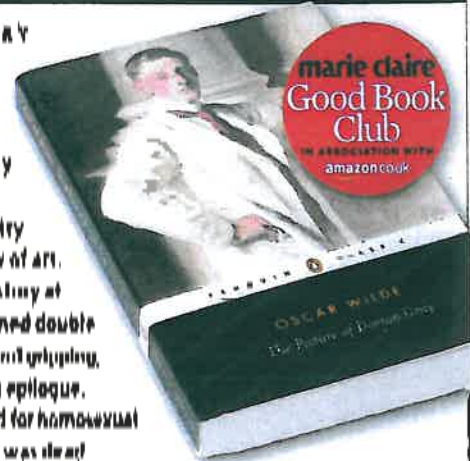
KATE ATKINSON



THE FATHERLANDS by Kate Atkinson (£12.99, Picador) A post-war novel about a family in the north of England, exploring the lives of three generations. It's a brilliant, moving, and funny novel that's a real gem. **THE SECRET HISTORY** by Lisa Klein (£12.99, Picador) A novel about a group of teenagers in a boarding school who discover a dark secret. It's a brilliant, moving, and funny novel that's a real gem. **THE FATHERLANDS** by Kate Atkinson (£12.99, Picador) A post-war novel about a family in the north of England, exploring the lives of three generations. It's a brilliant, moving, and funny novel that's a real gem.

MARIE CLAIRE'S BEST BOOKS EVER

32 THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY by Oscar Wilde (£5.99, Penguin Classics) It's hardly surprising that Oscar Wilde's only novel should have been a *torch de scandale*, with the stuffed shirts of the establishment huffing over its immorality and decadence. It has all the hallmarks of Wilde's famous plays: gilded, debonair youth indulging in witty epigrammatic repartee while sighing over the beauty of art. But *The Picture of Dorian Gray* has an early presidential story at its heart, as the secular charmed innocent leads a doomed double life, having gained his wish to never grow old. It's scary and gripping, with a dramatically grim ending and a heartbreaking epilogue. Within five years of its publication, Wilde was imprisoned for homosexual practices (illegal at the time) and within ten years he was dead!



THIS MONTH'S HOT READS

By Felipe Larro

BOOK OF THE MONTH



WE ARE ALL MADE OF GLUE by Marina Lowyck (£18.99, Fig Tree) A chance encounter at a shop transforms the lives of Georgie Sinclair, a freshly single mum of a teenage son with 'evil of the world' tears on his mind, and Mrs Shapiro, an elderly Jewish emigre with a retinue of smelly cats, and a wartime secret. Mrs Shapiro's ramshackle house is renovated by a coterie of unlikely but willing men, and happiness is miraculously restored.



THE WORST DATE EVER by Jane Busmann (£11.99, Macmillan) Celebrity journalist Jane Busmann headed to Uganda because she wanted to impress him, a handsome peacekeeper. But she soon discovered that being scared of Paris Hilton is scant preparation for meeting the victims of atrocities in a way that causes Mumpkin Winfield's rage at their circumstances with self-deprecating humour at her own dirty foibles. This is a marvelously raucous appraisal of the investigations of war crimes. ★ ★ ★ ★



SACRED HEARTS by Sarah Dunant (£14.99, Virago) When Serafina is spirited away to a nun's cell in the Italian city of Ferrara in 1470, the whole convent is kept awake by the disbelieving screams of the 16-year-old separated from her much-loved brother. As she struggles to escape, she realises her plot has potentially deadly consequences. Dunant's third Renaissance novel is beguilingly atmospheric and packed full of drama, intrigue, thwarted passion and all-out holy war. ★ ★ ★ ★



THE APHRODISIAC by Emma Carroll (£12.99, Corgi) This is a crazily good debut. The plot - teacher has affair with student - is not uncommon, but the way it's written is genius. Capturing the vocal inefficiency of the mean teen girls, their bewildered parents and an acerbic, isolated tutor with proverbial grace and originality, Carroll adds an extra mess with your mind dimension as the local drama school gets in on the act to perform a play based on the school's scandal. ★ ★ ★ ★



SHANGHAI GIRLS by Lisa See (£11.99, Bloomsbury) Two sisters, Pearl and May, live on the wild side in glamorous 1930s Shanghai. It all seems so shiny until their father's business is westerly gambling debts and marries the girls off to 'gold mountain' men: Americans. It's the eve of war, and the royalist pair are subjected to brutal reality before their arrival in LA, where a whole new series of challenges awaits them. A smart, brave look at cultural identity and sibling rivalry. ★ ★ ★ ★

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