

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



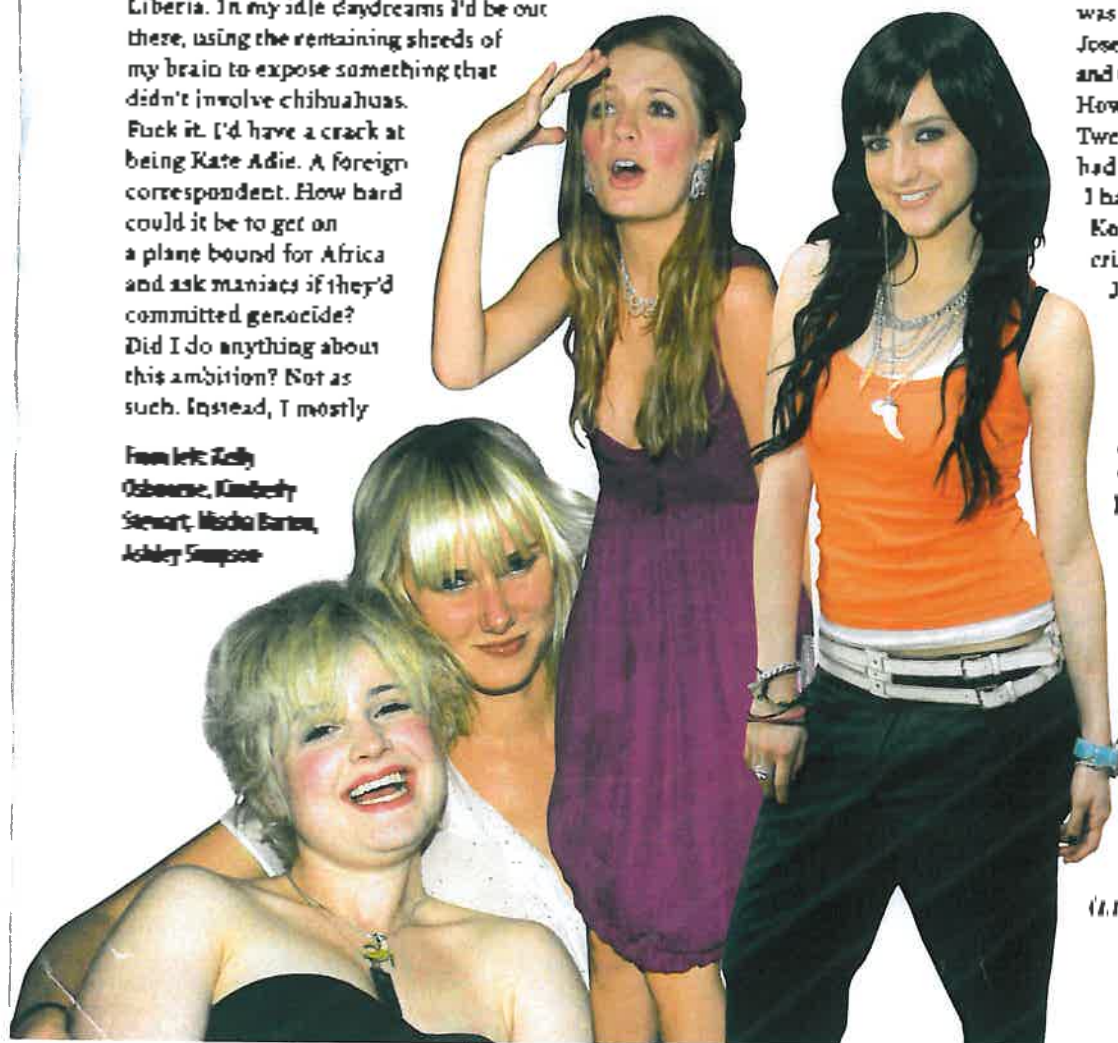
Busmann in Uganda

## 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 assisting (not trying to work out who was the bad guy. I'm still not sure how I got there. No, 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 0211 923 3110, [assemblyfestival.com](http://assemblyfestival.com). The Worst Date Ever by Jane Busmann (G.U.N., Busmann) is out on 4 July



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



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 humour. '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 Times* told me in 2001! The *New York Times* was a way of saying "Your boss, brownie!"

'No, they didn't!'

'I've got them all!'

'I don't know anything about it! It was clearly a joke and that's what I want

to reveal about at this point, but something else went on. Britney understood. 'The look for today was what, for you, love to Rachel Zoe? You had that expert eye and appeal, to get that look that's going to sweep away her public image, I remember we're commissioning a look. I guess I slipped off her top. She'd wear a necklace, a choker, where the diamonds were attached, and just had been forgetting about that. I had had done it again. The publicist must have seen it. The media and my top down. I couldn't see the face of my support team. I think it was about to hit me. "How did you probably get involved with a star interviewing something like now or then at this stage?" she said. "You may want to have some history in the room, especially in the room with all these. That's

# SHELF LIFE

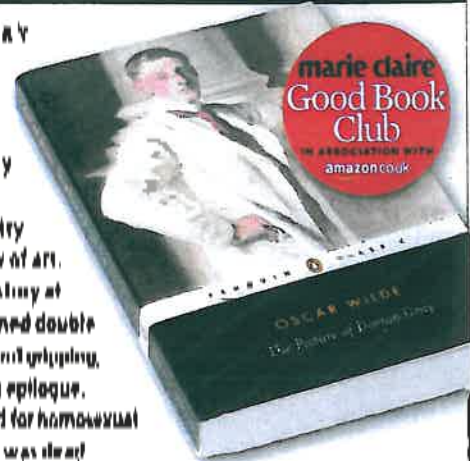
KATE ATKINSON



**THE FATHERLAND** by Hilary Mantel (12.99, Penguin Classics) It's hardly surprising that Hilary Mantel'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!

## MARIE CLAIRE'S BEST BOOKS EVER

**32 THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY** by Oscar Wilde (15.99, Penguin Classics)



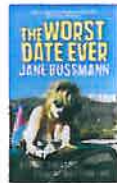
## THIS MONTH'S HOT READS

By Felipe Larro

### BOOK OF THE MONTH



**WE ARE ALL MADE OF GLUE** by Marina Lewycka (£18.99, Faber) A chance encounter at a shop transforms the lives of Georgie Sinciat, a freshly single mum of a teenage son with 'evil of the world' tears on his mind, and Mrs Shapiro, an elderly Jewish émigré 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 (eventually) restored.



**THE WORST DATE EVER** by Jane Husmann (£11.99, Macmillan) Celebrity journalist Jane Husmann 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, investigation, thwarted passion and all-out holy war. ★ ★ ★ ★



**THE APHRODITE** 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 rosy 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 royal 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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