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The showbiz writer who went to war

Jane Bussmann used to pen facile interviews with Hollywood starlets. Then she decided to cover genocide in Africa. Why? She had a crush on a peace envoy, she tells **Patrick Barkham**

A comic novel about child soldiers is a difficult concept to grasp, particularly when it is written by a showbiz journalist based in Hollywood who travelled to Africa because she had a crush on an American peace negotiator. The Worst Date Ever, the true story of the last six years of Jane Bussmann's life, is part romcom, part celebrity satire and part excoriating account of the failure to apprehend Joseph Kony, the Ugandan terrorist who has led his army of child soldiers on a 20-year campaign of hostage-taking, exploitation and murder in east Africa.

"I'm not laughing at sex slaves, I'm laughing at our excuses for not saving them," says Bussmann, when we meet. A petite woman who looks like she could be Tracey Emin's younger sister, she rattles out sentences peppered with expletives and dry one-liners. "It's a book about me thinking I've got to change my life, with catastrophic consequences, and also the silliness of chasing a bloke you are never in a million years going to cop off with." She calls it method writing: "You get way funnier shit in real life than you ever do in fiction."

Bussmann became a showbiz journalist by



accident. She grew up in Muswell Hill, north London, wanting to be a physicist. "Space travel seemed awesome and I remember Look and Learn books where we all wore jumpsuits to work," she says. The future appeared perfect: "I could be really fat and wear a jumpsuit and live off pills. What could I do in this world of jumpsuits and pills? I'd probably just work on time travel. But that didn't materialise due to the enormous quantities of booze I consumed after 16."

Physics was supplanted by rebellion and the only A-level Bussmann picked up was in art. She was then inspired to write sitcoms by meeting Johnny Speight, the screenwriter who created Alf Garnett, when her journalist father interviewed him for the Guardian. For a decade, she scratched around the alternative comedy scene, writing for *The Day Today*, *Brass Eye* and So Graham Norton and creating a flurry of edgy sitcom ideas - about two rabbits being drafted into war and chain-smoking mums - which tended not to get made.

After moving to Hollywood to pursue her screenwriting career, she was forced to write about celebrities for women's magazines to pay her bills. With her love of, as she puts it, booze, blasphemy and bad-taste jokes, she was spectacularly ill-suited to LA. "I can never make

up my mind if LA is a really bitchy girls' public school in which everyone is foul to each other all day long and constantly on a diet, or Jane Austen's England where you can make a terrible social faux pas at any time but with longer life expectancy so this shit goes on for 70 years instead of 40," she says.

It was the George Bush boom years and California was basking in "the golden age of stupid". She would arrange an interview with Britney Spears, her entourage would cancel it, and Bussmann would have to concoct a story about how grounded and healthy Spears was when she was actually, at that time, a chaotic mess. The only good celebrities she met were Dolly Parton ("When you talk to her, you believe everything is going to be all right," says Bussmann. "You just want to sit on her knee and your eyes are being sucked down into this valley of tits") and Marilyn Manson ("You swoon when you interview him because he's so gracious and funny").

So she loyally lied about her celebrity subjects, indulging their opinions on chihuahuas and religion, until she interviewed Ashton

Bussmann . . . 'I'm not laughing at sex slaves; I'm laughing at our excuses for not saving them'
Photograph Marc Smith/Macmillan

Kutcher around the time he got together with Demi Moore. The interview was published with fictional quotes inserted by an editor, Kutcher and his lawyers went nuclear and Bussmann, who denied inventing the quotes, figured that now that she was hated by both her celebrity subjects and her journalist paymasters, she had better escape.

When she spotted a picture of John Prendergast, a US conflict negotiator who specialised in African affairs and sought to help end the conflict in Uganda, she fantasised about a route out. Prendergast "wasn't just hot; he was wise," she wrote. She fancied him, and as her "only job skill was turning people into celebrities" she decided to travel to Uganda to meet Prendergast and write a profile of him as the pin-up boy of peace, the George Clooney of conflict resolution.

She blagged a commission from the Sunday Times and travelled to a remote town in Uganda, only to find that Prendergast had dashed off again. Funny, excruciating and utterly exhausting, her book tells of her desperate blundering around Uganda, being spied on and befriended, and her gradual discovery of the evil surrounding Kony and his Lord's Resistance Army.

She has a keen eye for detail, from the >>

« marbled-wash jeans on sale in the markets to the “purposeful white people dotted everywhere” who drive self-important white Toyotas with UNHCR or UNESCO on the side, “the international acronyms for don’t shoot”, and her experiences expose some uncomfortable parallels between celebrity journalism and the life of a foreign correspondent. In both Uganda and Hollywood, people in power try to bludgeon journalists into accepting their twisted versions of the truth. In both worlds, Bussmann has her reality tested daily by bullies.

Her self-deprecating descriptions of her cluelessness might, however, suggest that any idiot can become a foreign correspondent. Can anyone really pitch up overseas and uncover complex stories of violence and corruption? “A real reporter could have done it in slightly less than six years and maybe covered another couple of wars in the meantime. They could have also done it without dropping Biros on the floor with your shirt undone and whatever desperate tricks I used to get close up to colonels,” she says.

She was spurred on by guilt, because when she met children in camps who had been rescued from Kony’s army, she “very foolishly” promised them she would help, “something a real reporter would never do in a million years”, she says.

While the camps of terrified and disorientated Ugandans displaced by the fighting in the north of their country are emptying today, Kony is still a wanted man, holed up in a remote corner of the Democratic Republic of Congo and continuing to commit atrocities with his army of young conscripts and hostages.

Between the one-liners, Bussmann argues that Kony is the “perfect villain” who helped his opponents in the Ugandan government attract foreign aid while some in the army enriched themselves. “The fact that an army of 40,000 couldn’t catch one man and a bunch of kids, who at the beginning just had machetes, is highly suspicious,” she says. “Look at the ghost soldiers. This is an army that according to the [Ugandan] government newspaper have up to 60% of soldiers in certain units missing because they never existed. Corrupt bosses were claim-



John Prendergast... ‘He’s like George Clooney. He belongs to the world’

ing salaries for soldiers who didn’t exist. I don’t know much about ghosts but I know they are fucking shit at catching child kidnappers. They are right up there with werewolves, they are unreliable and useless.”

Bussmann is scathing about ineffective international efforts to stop Kony and badly targeted aid money that has poured into Uganda. For many years the west assisted the country’s long-serving president, Yoweri Museveni, and elevated him into a golden boy “when for 10 years he’s had these people living in camps and hasn’t been able to catch this one guy for 20 years,” she says. “Look at Hillary Clinton’s [1998] comment, ‘There are no easy answers.’ One nun rescued 109 girls [from Kony] and the Ugandan army rescued one. There are some easy answers. The army is bent.”

Bussmann also aims her comic fury at many of the charities working in Uganda. She thinks they helped prop up a failing regime. Charities might point out that it is almost impossible to work in a country unless you are at least tolerated by the host government. It is easy for a maverick outsider to diagnose the ills; far harder to be a charity worker and cure them. “Look at the International Committee of the Red Cross. You can’t take the argument that you can’t piss off the people you are trying to work next to. The ICRC were aware of the death camps during the second world war but they

didn’t speak up for that precise reason. You don’t work with these people: you call the cops.”

The charity projects that work, argues Bussmann, are “micro-financed”, accountable and transparent, and usually where small amounts of money are “given to women who need it and know what to do with it”. (One charity boss told her that 90% of women paid back loans whereas only 10% of men did.)

It would not be giving much away to say that Bussmann’s romantic quest - to bag Prendergast - ends in failure but she is actually quite coy about their meetings in her book. Did she ever seduce him? “We did go on a date. He might have been under the illusion it was an interview. I naively believed there was a moment when there was an ‘in’. Then I just looked at him and thought, you are so out of my league. He’s like Clooney, he belongs to the world so,” she sighs with jokey theatricality, “I let him go.” They met again last week at a conference in Washington. “He looked at me slightly differently when he saw me so I think he’s read the book. He looked slightly nervous.”

Before she wrote the book, Bussmann turned this extraordinary tale into a one-woman play, performing off Broadway and at the Edinburgh Festival. She has sold the film rights and is now working on the script. Given her contempt for Los Angeles, I am surprised when she says she is still living there. Why did she return? “Fuck knows.” Are there any good things about it? “The salads are huge. And old Hollywood - you feel you are surrounded by benevolent ghosts.”

Although she is planning to travel back to Africa to write a TV drama set in the Congo, she is still based in LA for her other work commitments. She is developing a sitcom and writing a book about her terrible dating experiences in California called *Awful Nights*. “I’ll do that and get the fuck out. I’m going to live in Nairobi. I’ve got it all planned.” Why Nairobi? Her answer is typical of Bussmann. “Lunatics. You don’t go a single day without an insane conversation”

The Worst Date Ever: War Crimes, Hollywood Heart-Throbs and Other Abominations is published by Macmillan at £12.99. Bussmann will be performing her show *Bussmann’s Holiday* at the Assembly Rooms, Edinburgh, from 24-30 August.



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