

# Not chick lit, but literary chic

Female authors are starting to look stylish again, writes Bronwyn Cosgrave

Not all the ink spilled over the recent arrival of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* was used to analyse the merits of the novel's plot. A surprising amount was spent commenting on the newly lithe frame of Potter's creator, J.K. Rowling – and the clothes adorning it. Gone forever, it seems, are the high-street finds, Elizabeth Hurley-style white jeans, Vivienne Westwood eccentricities and frazzled strawberry blonde mane in which the author once faced her fans.

Last month, at the Raisa Gorbachev Foundation fundraiser at Hampton Court, jaw-dropping Bond Street jewels, a luminous complexion and a demure Grace Kelly-blond chignon faultlessly accessorised Rowling's green strapless chiffon Alberta Ferretti gown. A day later, a gold satin Prada cocktail number, yellow diamonds and chic, tan Christian Louboutins accentuated her supermodel swagger at the London world premiere of the fifth Potter film, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*. It is a transformation almost as miraculous as rock star Courtney Love's recent loss of 30lbs in a month.

The flamboyant method of book promotion whereby an authoress enhances her runaway success with a drop-dead gorgeous promotional wardrobe (usually, although not in Rowling's case, on loan from from a leading designer) is not unknown. In 1966, for example, the late Jacqueline Susann made Pucci her identifiable signature. She sported it at her typewriter and in the portrait adorning the book jacket of her record-breaking bestseller *Valley of the Dolls*, aware that the luxury Italian label, in which Marilyn Monroe was buried, captured the danger and decadence of her prose.

Similarly, a trio of Susann's heirs – Judith Krantz, Jackie Collins and Danielle Steel and her daughters – heightened their mystique by flaunting fabulous labels such as Chanel and Oscar de la Renta upon publication of their frothy, escapist fantasies. For biographer Kitty Kelly, only Adolfo, Nancy Reagan's favourite couturier, would do.

Yet until Rowling came out of Potter-induced hiding, there has been a dearth of attractively clad female authors on the publishing scene. Madonna pulled off a literary-chic coup back in September 2003, giving the first reading from her children's book, *The English Roses*, in a rose-covered Prada ensemble that perfectly coordinated with her fairytale's theme – but then she is better known as a singer than a writer.

Novelist Zadie Smith – a great beauty possessing natural sartorial flair – only recently released her inner fashionista, heeding the advice of an Italian friend who told her: "You won't be young for long. So have fun with it while you can." Even then, Smith couldn't face last year's



Vanity Fair Oscars party in her "only expensive dress" – a long, red Donna Karan Grecian column. Instead she sported a secondhand raw silk lavender shirt-dress. "Serious" authors like Smith – that is, those frequently short-listed for literary prizes – fear a stylish appearance will upstage their talent.

Author and former Vanity Fair editor Tina Brown, on her June 2007 transatlantic tour promoting *The Diana Chronicles*, also took the low-key authorial look to a new level of literary chic. She sported a made-to-measure monochromatic Ralph Lauren wardrobe. Incorporating three complete black and white looks from Lauren's spring/summer 2007 runway, as well as a long jersey wrap dress and a leather jacket, the deluxe basics proved the perfect colour scheme to offset her blockbuster biography's brash hot pink cover.

Plum Sykes deployed the fashion contacts she amassed working at *Vogue* when publicising her second novel *The Debutante Divorcée* – just as I did for the launch of my most recent book, *Made For Each Other: Fashion and the Academy Awards*.

We both relied on fashion PRs to organise and foot the bill for our book launches. And while on her tour Sykes modelled Ralph Lauren, Oscar de la Renta, Chanel, Ferragamo and Pucci – some of the designers that sponsored the eight launch parties at their boutiques which catapulted her novel to the top of the New York Times bestseller list –

on mine, I was clothed by Alberta Ferretti, Barbara Tfank, Erdem Moralioglu, Moschino, One (an upscale Notting Hill vintage emporium), and footwear designer Rupert Sanderson. Access to all of it paid dividends as my new, improved wardrobe attracted the interest of the paparazzi and won me extra promotional TV airtime.

"Glamour sells," states Sykes emphatically. "Three hundred people turned up to my book launch at Ralph Lauren in Chicago. Three hundred people turned up for another at Oscar de la Renta's New York boutique. Who wouldn't want to go to a book party at a boutique where there's champagne and canapés? So many more people turn up than at a bookstore event. So you sell so many more books."

Wanda McDaniel, executive vice-president of entertainment relations for Giorgio Armani, has recently outfitted (in Armani) a list of celebrity authors including Maria Shriver, Bill Clinton, Steve Martin and David Steinberg for literary tours. And yet, when it comes to dressing the high-profile for promotional endeavours, film, music and sports superstars take precedence over writers. "Authors are not top of the priority list," concedes McDaniel. But clothing them evidently makes a refreshing change from catering to demanding celebrities and their notoriously choosy stylists. Writers, she says, "are always so grateful".



Top, from left: Plum Sykes in Ferragamo at one of her book launches; Tina Brown wearing Ralph Lauren on her 'Diana' promotional tour; Bronwyn Cosgrave in a vintage dress from One. Left: J.K. Rowling in a gold satin Prada dress at the premiere of the fifth Harry Potter film

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