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My Daughter, the Best-Selling Novelist



By Marty Kaplan

By the way, have I mentioned that my 19-year-old daughter's novel is a bestseller? *Hancock Park* by Isabel Kaplan has now made it onto the *Los Angeles Times* hardback fiction bestseller list for two weeks running.

If I haven't already buttonholed you - or emailed, Facebooked, Twittered, phoned or faxed you the news - it's only because you haven't been within hailing distance. So if you see someone swollen with parental pride, shouting from the rafters and rooftops, that would be me.

How a high school junior got a contract from HarperCollins to write a novel: that's a story of talent, pluck and luck. The luck part was learning that a woman she was talking to at a party was a player in the New York publishing world. The pluck was coolly pitching to her, on the spot, a novel about a privileged 16-year-old girl struggling to stay sane and grounded in the Los Angeles fast lane. The talent, and more than a little discipline, was writing a biting funny first chapter, plus a story outline, that turned the publishing executive's "Why don't you send me something?" into a deal.

It took two years to get from there to publication. When the executive had a falling-out with the publishing house, it was more good luck that Izzy's manuscript was championed by a terrific editor there, who guided her through a year of revisions, proving E.B. White's adage that "the best writing is rewriting."*

Actually, I don't really know how the book evolved; Izzy didn't show the manuscript to anyone but her editor until it was in bound galleys. That this caused me a certain amount of nervousness is captured by another writing adage: "Write what you know."

First novels, especially young authors' first novels, tend toward memoir. How fictionalized would *Hancock Park* turn out to be? After all, that's the real name of the Los Angeles neighborhood where I live, and where my daughter grew up and went to school. Was it so farfetched to imagine that other aspects of real life - like, oh, the time I promised her a cat but then welched on the deal - would also make their way into the book? And if the cat was fair game, what about all the other things, big and small, that happen inside a

family? And what if those things weren't viewed from my, you know, mature and generous parental perspective, but were seen instead by a gimlet adolescent eye?

This anxiety prompted more than a few euphemistic pronouncements from me, during the year of rewrites, about the wonderful opportunities that writers of fiction have to make things up, to be sprung from the constraints of autobiography, to let the characters take the story in unexpected directions. *A roman à clef*, I breezily observed, wasn't nearly as interesting as a novel made from whole cloth.

It wasn't hard for Izzy to hear my pleading subtext. "Don't worry, Dad," she finally said, intending to quell my fears. "In the book, when the parents split up, the father takes up with a hottie half his age. *No one would possibly think that was you.*" I guess I had that coming.

On the other hand, her friends' reaction to hearing that a novel was coming turned out to be mainly a hopeful, "Am I in it?" Even among blasé Hollywood kids, many of whose parents are boldfaced names, it's apparently more fun to be able to say about the mean girls in the story, "That's me!" than to hear that the characters are composites.

I suspect that the biggest reason to want to claim that a character is you is the possibility that the book will end up as a movie or television series. The question Izzy has probably been asked most frequently during her promotional outings has been, "Who would play you?" She always explains patiently that the book's narrator isn't her, it's a character, though when pressed she sometimes mentions Dakota Fanning (she played Tom Cruise's daughter in Stephen Spielberg's *War of the Worlds*). No one's asked me who would play me, but just in case a casting director should want my input, rather than explaining that the Dad isn't really me, I'm compiling a list of balding boomer hunks.

A few pages into reading my daughter's novel for the first time, my fear of being nailed by merciless prose melted away. What replaced it was wry laughter, and identification with the narrator's outsider sensibility, and absorption in the story, and above all the feeling, Hey, this is a really good writer. Perhaps, as the father of the author, I'm inherently incapable of having an objective view of something like that. That's why it's fortunate also to have the marketplace's opinion. Speaking of which, have I told you that *Hancock Park* made the bestseller list?

UPDATE: *A phrase in this paragraph originally said that most of the executive's books were cancelled; according to the executive, this is incorrect: only one or two were.

This is my column from The Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles. You can read more of my columns here, and e-mail me there if you'd like.

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Marty Kaplan 

USC Annenberg professor and Norman Lear Center director