

March 14, 2004

## **Focus: Who is 'Belle de Jour', the high-class hooker whose web diary is set to be a literary sensation?**

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**The clues point towards a middle-aged man with an award for bad sex...**

She is a male fantasy who has always seemed too good to be true: a stiletto-heeled sex bomb with the erudition of a college professor. She is Belle de Jour, a London call girl who has whipped up a storm in literary circles with a diary of her extraordinary life.

By her own account Belle is the sort of woman who will pleasure a man to exhaustion and later discuss the finer points of French cinema. She will perform the contortions of a gymnast and still do the washing up. Last week it emerged that she is also fast becoming famous and likely to grow rich. She is one humdinger — if she's for real.

Her memoir of life as a high-class hooker began on the internet as a "web-log" or "blog", a diary accessible by anyone through their computer. As readers admired its style and wit, mainstream publishers took an interest, keen to mine further the chick-lit genre that made fortunes from Bridget Jones and Sex and the City. Last week Belle confirmed she has signed a deal, rumoured to be six figures, to turn her blog into a book. Film and fortune beckon.

There is only one problem: this tigress of the night with her Jimmy Choos, her lacy basque and her liking for Chanel nail varnish may in reality be more like a middle-aged author with horn-rimmed specs.

To cap it all, the writer in question, far from being a bed-trashing love goddess, is a past winner of the bad sex award handed out annually by The Literary Review magazine for the most embarrassing description of bonking.

THE story began last October when Belle first popped up on the web. It is easily done: log on to a blogging site, register under a false name and away you go. It is free and the software takes care of all the technicalities. You can write what you like and nobody need know who you are.

"Her" life of vice began thus: "Belle de Jour, diary of a London call girl, Vendredi 24 Octobre. Located what sounded like an excellent small, discreet agency (word of mouth, as they say). After e-mail

contact and sending my photos, I finally arranged to meet the manager . . .”

From the start the blog had cultural complexities: the name Belle de Jour comes from an acclaimed 1967 film, starring Catherine Deneuve, about a French housewife who is a part-time prostitute.

The blog went on to describe how Belle was taken on to the escort agency's books and began to juggle clients, her on-off boyfriend and various other troublesome characters in a whirl of hotels, nightclubs and taxi rides around nocturnal London. What lifted it above the sordid morass of web sex was its cleverness and humour.

In jaunty style, Belle skips from intimate body parts to the social anatomy of Britain. At university she had “studied a wholly academic humanities subject useless to the world at large”. Her flat is “furnished in the slightly naff flowery vein favoured by landlords of the aspirant class”. And she has taken care not to spread disease — by having a flu jab.

Word of mouth worked. Soon her blog was being mentioned by others on the web and it came to the attention of the print media. In December a newspaper awarded Belle the first prize in its annual competition for the best-written blog.

Perhaps spurred on by her success, Belle was in expansive mood the next month, as her entry for Vendredi 23 Janvier records: “Regarding orgasms at work. I don't. I don't equate the number of orgasms with the level of enjoyment of sex . . . Let's be honest, this is a customer service position, not a self-fulfilment odyssey . . .”

A few of the best bloggers have already gone to mainstream success and the potential for Belle was clear. Somehow she came to the attention of *The Erotic Review*, the magazine of highbrow smut that has been given a dose of Viagra by its editor Rowan Pelling. It began publishing extracts from Belle's blog.

At the same time Patrick Walsh, a literary agent who includes the Booker prize winner DBC Pierre among his clients, was talking to at least two publishers about Belle. One was *Serpent's Tail*; another was Weidenfeld & Nicolson. Walsh was keeping Belle's identity closely guarded. Peter Ayrton at *Serpent* was presented with a woman said to be Belle, but was not told her real name. He is not sure that she was the real Belle.

Heather Garnons-Williams, an editor at Weidenfeld, was asked to sign a confidentiality agreement before being allowed to meet Belle. She won't talk about Belle's identity.

Walsh said last week that he was working only with people he could trust: “We did various things with bank accounts and so on to make sure that she (Belle) can't be tracked down. We are just not interested in playing the guessing game. She has family and friends she needs to protect.”

He also had a property, in terms of the book, to protect and this week he will be trying to sell the international rights at the London Book Fair.

Those who knew Belle's identity kept shtoom; the rest were left wondering. Could she be for real? Did such a multi-talented sex

machine exist? It is a publishing mystery — except for some overlooked clues about who Belle might really be.

AMONG Walsh's existing clients is Christopher Hart, an oddball, lively writer who happens to be a contributing editor to *The Erotic Review*. His first novel, published in 1999, was an elegy for rural life but he soon moved on to racier things.

His second outing in 2001 was called *Rescue Me* and is the first-person story of a man who becomes a male prostitute. Despite being as erudite as Belle's blog, the novel also won Hart the bad sex award from *The Literary Review* for containing gems such as this: "Her hand is moving away from my knee and heading north. Heading unnervingly and with a steely will towards the pole. And, like Sir Ranulph Fiennes, Pamela will not easily be discouraged."

Hart was educated at Cheltenham, Oxford and London, and his male prostitute is happy to discourse on Rousseau, Goethe and Schopenhauer; in the same way Belle is wont to drop into her blog mentions of Samuel Pepys, Tennessee Williams and Richard Dawkins.

They also share a fascination for Liz Hurley and a tendency to name-check Britney Spears and Harvey Nichols. In addition they both seem to dislike new year resolutions but to enjoy the words "septuagenarian" and "glutes".

While Belle drops into her blog the name of Doris Day, Hart chucks John Mills and Kenneth More into his novel. In Belle's blog, as well as in *Rescue Me*, characters cuddle up together "spooning". Just vague echoes and coincidences? Perhaps. But there are links between Belle's blog and the real Hart, too.

Early on in the blog Belle hangs out in the Blue Posts, a pub in Soho. It happens to be just round the corner from *The Erotic Review*, with which Walsh has of late been keeping in close contact, according to some sources.

As for family, Belle is coy about her parents but in one unusual passage she describes how her father has a problem with marriage: "It's not that he has some bizarre hang-ups about the sanctity of marriage . . . No, it's actually dad's overenthusiasm for the blessed event . . ." It is a description that fits well with Hart's father who is a retired Church of England clergyman.

There are other hints, too. Among the cultural figures whom Belle mentions are the writers Jonathan Coe and Jeffrey Eugenides. Although highly successful, these writers are pretty rarefied reading for a busy call girl.

Maybe Belle just has good taste. Or maybe she knows that, like Hart, they are linked to the bad sex award: Coe has long expressed a fear of winning the prize and Eugenides was once nominated for it.

There is another suggestive passage in Belle's blog. It is an entry in December when Belle describes an occasion when she hands in a payslip at the bank with a drawing scribbled on it.

"The cashier looked at the drawing and looked at me. 'This is good. Did you do this?' she asked. 'Yes, well, I'm a . . . cartoonist,' I lied.

Which is how the people at the bank came to believe that I draw for a living.”

Interestingly there is a well-known real illustrator and cartoonist — who also happens to be called Christopher Hart. Was art imitating life? Last week Belle was playing very hard to get for a call girl. She did not seem to be taking e-mails or males.

Walsh was giving little away. “It’s not Hart, but I can see how you put these connections together,” he said. He insists Belle is a real call-girl.

However, Pelling let in a chink of light. She admitted that she knows who Belle is. So is Belle a past winner of the bad sex award? “It’s entirely up to your own speculation,” she said.

Did she know whether the author was a thirtysomething man with glasses, as Hart is? “I would neither agree nor disagree,” she said, beginning to laugh. Is Belle, Hart? “I can’t possibly comment.”

When finally tracked down yesterday Hart said: “Oh not the call girl, oh, you’re kidding. I promise you it’s not me. But I wish it was me.”

He said he is working on a novel with hardly any sex in it, adding jokingly: “Perhaps I’m all sexed out after writing Belle de Jour.”

So he denies being the mystery writer? “Yes, I am denying it,” he said. But he would say that, wouldn’t he? “Yes, I would say that, wouldn’t I.”

There is, of course, one big obstacle to Hart being the author: could a man carry off the pretence of being a call girl? The answer may be that Belle is more than one person.

Could Pelling or Annie Blinkhorn, her deputy at The Erotic Review, have a hand in giving Belle a feminine voice? Pelling refused to be drawn.

“I’m free to say that I have met Belle,” Pelling said, “but I really don’t feel free to speculate.” Early in her blog, Belle recorded: “Yes, I really am a call girl. A bored journaliste (sic) could probably fake this blog but I’m not that clever.” Many people increasingly think he/she is.

## **SELLING SEX BY THE BOOK**

There is a long tradition of sexual confessions becoming publishing phenomena, and often the authors are not at all what they seem

### **Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure**

Also known as Fanny Hill, it was first published in 1749. It tells the story of an orphan girl who travels from country life into urban decadence. Giving an account of her sexual awakening and prostitution that was extraordinarily frank for the time, it was in fact written by a man called John Cleland.

### **The Story of O**

A beautiful fashion photographer in Paris has an affair with a man called René. It is so overwhelmingly intense that O submits to degrading sexual and psychological experiences. Though its content is shocking, its style made it a classic. It was published under the pseudonym of Pauline Reage, and many suspected the author was a man. She was in fact a Frenchwoman, Dominique Aury.

### **The Bride Stripped Bare**

Published last year, it is the tale of a suburban housewife who embarks on a journey of awakening, including sex with strangers. Though published anonymously, the author was unmasked as Nikki Gemmill, who admitted she had drawn on the experiences of her friends in writing the book. It went on to be a bestseller in her native Australia.

### **One Hundred Strokes of the Hairbrush Before Going to Sleep**

Last year a teenager from Sicily became a sensation with a novel about her sexual adventures. It was pitched as a thinly-veiled autobiography. The author, Melissa Panarello, initially tried to remain anonymous but the book's success forced her to reveal her identity. It has sold 500,000 copies and is being translated into English.

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