

I was branded a call-girl blogger

Media speculation about the identity of the author behind an internet diary of a London prostitute fell upon one woman last week when she was 'unmasked' in the *Times*. Here writer **Sarah Champion** gives an exclusive account of how it feels to be mistaken for the notorious 'Belle de Jour'

EVER SINCE I found myself described as a 'wild child' in a local paper as a teenager, I dreaded that one day I would wake up to find paparazzi outside my door. Since then I've published a book of ecstasy drug stories in the wake of Leah Betts's death, briefly dated a well-known TV comedian and shared a spliff with a former member of the Beatles. But it never once occurred to me that what would finally bring the paparazzi to my door would be my use of commas.

It was my punctuation that had me labelled last week as either the most celebrated literary hoaxer of the day – or Britain's most famous call girl. And all

because four years ago I wrote an insignificant review of a book called *Playing the Moldovans at Tennis*, in which I wrote that the author's stunt of presenting a plastic B&Q round table to Moldova's new King Arthur was 'cringe-worthy'.

When last Tuesday I took a leisurely stroll to a San Francisco café it seemed an ordinary Californian day. Then the call came. It was a journalist from the *Times*. Since Tony Blair had visited my old school, Oakwood, days before, I assumed that he was searching for alumni – perhaps he'd found me through Friends Reunited. Not so.

I would later discover that



How the storm of speculation over Belle de Jour gathered in the press.

a whole investigative team was on my trail.

'You do realise everyone is looking for you? You're phenomenal. It's incredible,' he enthused. 'Everybody is talking about you. It has taken me five days to find you.'

'Well,' I laughed, 'San Francisco is an easy place to hide.'

I let him talk, searching for clues as he purred with delight about finally getting to speak to the *real* Belle De Jour – although, being 6,000

miles from the centre of the hype, I had no idea what he was talking about. Who was he really and who had put him up to this wind-up?

'Can I just ask you, is this a work of fiction or are you a working call girl?' he concluded, with a conspiratorial whisper. A what? My heart missed more than one beat as reality hit, 'Oh fuck, this guy might be serious.'

Only after he hung up, did I discover why he was so excited. Belle De Jour was a

website proclaiming itself the 'Diary of a London Call Girl' and guessing the identity of its anonymous writer had become an obsession among the media and bloggers since it was revealed that she had signed a 'six-figure' book deal.

So Thursday morning saw me share the front page of the *Times* with Gordon Brown's Budget. And inside, across two pages, was the newspaper's verdict: I was either a fraud or a whore.

I want to make it clear that not only have I never been a call girl – which will especially please my mother, who has had journalists calling on her Manchester home – but I am not the author of the Belle de Jour net diary.

I have not lived in London since 1999 and, far from a predilection for manicures, Gucci and French affectations, many will testify to my dedication to trainers, pints and northern slang. Meanwhile, I'm not big on obsessive daily confessionals, having rarely as a journalist ever written a piece in the first person. Until now.

'Your commas gave you away,' a mysterious one-line email from the *Times* man teased me. Only when the paper hit the streets did I discover what he meant. It was all down to punctuation.

And a team of journalists who, like Agent Mulder, desperately wanted to believe.

The *Times* recruited 'the world's foremost literary sleuth' to the cause – Professor Don Foster, or 'Doctor Comma', as he quickly became known in my household. Daft as it sounds, merely to discover the identity of a blogger the paper had gone to the extremes of hiring a New York academic described as the world's number one 'textual Ghostbuster', an expert previously brought in to study Monica Lewinsky's writings.

In his book *Author Unknown: On the Trail of Anonymity*, he describes his successes. He is credited with confirming the authenticity of the Unabomber and unveiling Joe Klein, the

author of *Primary Colors*. In my case, the *Times* boasted it took Foster 'just 20 minutes to discover what Britain's literary establishment had missed'. Belle and I apparently shared a unique 'linguistic fingerprint'.

The clues were in the way I used my 'brackets, dashes, compound verbs and italics'. Dr Comma noticed that Belle had used the word 'cringe-worthy', which he considered an unusual hyphenation, and the phrase 'suffice to say'. Using his unique skills, he entered these clues into Google. Fewer than 200 webpages in the world contained both. Like Belle, I had once used them – in a travel book review when working for Amazon.co.uk.

On this evidence, I found myself besieged at my San Francisco apartment while my parents were being pursued by reporters posing as

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BELLE DE JOUR

DIMANCHE 26 OCTOBRE

'So now we have to talk about services.' She pronounced the word like it had twelve vowels: suuuuuuuvices. 'Have you

A-levels? Well, yes, but that was years ago. Besides, I was under no impression that academic fluency was a

'You know,' her voice dropped to a whisper, 'Anal.' I'm quite sure the waitress didn't need to refill my coffee

'Oh, right. Yes, I can do that. Provided I haven't been out for a curry the night before.'

delivery men. 'While no piece of evidence is conclusive by itself, I'm sure we have found our woman,' Foster told the *Times*.

He backed up his findings with 'internal biographical evidence, that sealed my fate'. I had once lived within a mile of the A23 and had Yorkshire connections (I own the house in Mytholmroyd where Ted Hughes was born). In a recent entry in Belle De Jour's weblog, her boyfriend had flown to San Diego. My partner was in San Francisco.

How could I be anyone other than the real Belle De Jour? By way of Moldova, West Norwood and California, she and I will be forever linked.

To read the diary, go to belledejour-uk.blogspot.com

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