

Candace Bushnell's new book, "Lipstick Jungle," says women should be responsible for creating meaningful lives instead of relying on men.

# Sex and the jungle

**Candace Bushnell pens a new mantra for the 40-something set**

By **ORLA HEALY**  
Post Fashion Editor

**L**INE up the watermelon cosmos and get ready to be consumed by the complicated lives, loves and struggles of three fascinating friends: Victory Ford, Wendy Healy and Nico O'Neilly — the swank, successful and super-spunky 40-something protagonists of Candace Bushnell's lip-smacking new novel "Lipstick Jungle."

The book, which will be published by Hyperion on Sept. 1, comes a decade after Bushnell was christened "a martini-wielding Jane Austen," for the "Sex and the City" newspaper columns she

penned for the New York Observer about the yeasty escapades of 30-something bachelorettes dating a rambunctious mix of toxic N.Y.C. men.

"I've always written about the women I know," says Bushnell. "Ten years ago it was single women in their 30s, whose focus was more on men, having fun and creating excitement than it was on their careers."

"Now," says the 46-year-old author,

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**Fashion**



# 'Sex' scribe's new

**C**andace Bushnell's new novel, "Lipstick Jungle," follows a trio of power players — fashion editor Nico O'Neilly, designer Victory Ford and movie producer Wendy Healy — as they lunch at Michael's, shmooze at Da Silvano and have the requisite quick-sex session in a bathroom stall at Bungalow 8.

**Sound familiar? So do some of the characters themselves. While Bushnell insists they're all fictional, certain personalities in "Lipstick Jungle," appear inspired by boldface names in New York City's real-life concrete jungle.**

**MICHAEL BERGIN**

Is Nico's extramarital love interest — a strappy, but sweet himbo named Kirby Atwood — modeled on "Baywatch" actor Michael Bergin, the former Calvin Klein underwear poster-boy? "Oh God, she thought," Bushnell writes. "God, she was really having a great time. Could it get any better than this, having great sex with a f—ing Calvin Klein underwear model?"

In real life, Bushnell reportedly dallied with Bergin before he moved on to have what he claims was a love affair with the late Carolyn Bessette Kennedy.



**BONNIE FULLER & TINA BROWN**

"Bonfire magazine" editor Nico O'Neilly is equal parts Bonnie Fuller and Tina Brown.

O'Neilly is forced to resign as editor of Glimmer magazine (published, natch, by Ratz Naste) after it comes out that she'd been interviewing with a rival publication for a larger paycheck. The plot point recalls when Fuller was editor of Glamour and had to resign when word broke she was trying to land the editor's chair at Harper's Bazaar — a position that would eventually go to Kate Betts.

Socially, Nico is more like Brown. Nico and her older husband, Seymour, "threw some kind of party every two weeks in their townhouse ranging from small dinners for 12 cocktail parties for a 100. The parties were business affairs, really, designed to keep Nico's profile high, to form alliances and to make sure they knew everything that was going to



happen before it appeared in the news."

In a cute move, Brown hosted last week's "girls only" bash to fete "Lipstick Jungle" in the courtyard of the Sutton Place townhouse apartment she shares with her husband, Harry Evans.



**RON PERELMAN**

Victory Ford (whose gutsy attitude reminds us of Ellen Barkin) is surprised when she falls for crass, uncouth tycoon Lyne Bennett, a pugnacious overachiever whose vast wealth is matched only by the size of his ego and the vigor of his control-freak tendencies. Sound like anyone you know?



**JUDITH REGAN & BERNIE KERIK**

Here, Bushnell makes a thinly veiled allusion to the romance between the editrix and the former top cop: "Recently the papers had been filled with a story about a politician who was not going to be getting a government position because of what people at first thought were 'nanny problems' but later turned out to be an affair with a high-level attorney at a law firm. Why this woman —

Marianna — had an affair with Burt the politician was beyond Nico. Burt was old, bald and pickled."

But it's Bushnell's assessment of the 50-something Marianna that's bound to set tongues wagging around town: "the old model of the powerful woman — the woman who became successful because she loved being the only woman in a room filled with powerful men. She was the woman who didn't trust, or like, other women — who still believed that the only way a woman could become successful was by being a bitch."



**NICOLE KIDMAN**

There are shades of Kidman in actress Jenny Cadine, who's "considered one of the most beautiful women in the world, but hadn't had a relationship for over three years."



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"I'm writing about what happens when those women hit their 40s. Whether they're married or not, they've realized that Mr. Big is not going to come along and save them. They know that they alone are responsible for whether they are going to create meaningful lives for themselves. And because New York — with its unique social tribes, status anxieties and raw competitive spirit — features so prominently in the pages of this book, it's hardly surprising that ambition is the unifying theme that binds Bushnell's three gutsy protagonists. "Women who live in New York aren't

here to hang out," says Bushnell, who at the precocious age of 8 decided she wanted to make the New York Times best-seller list as a novelist. "We're here to make it. While a stereotype of the hard, bitter New York woman will always exist," she says, "it's no longer the norm. The idea that we have to be nasty and do things that make us uncomfortable in order to get ahead often prevents women going forth. You don't have to be a bitch to succeed. It's not attractive. It will hurt your career, and it's certainly not going to make you happy." Her publisher, Hyperion vice president Ellen Archer, believes she's sitting on the sound proofs of a ticking best seller.

"That's what I'm hearing from women who've read the book. What fascinates me about the feedback I'm getting is how different the readers are, yet how closely they identify with the character and the situations they find themselves in." Archer is referring to the life-crumbing crises faced by Victory, a fashion designer who heads her own international conglomerate; Wendy, an acclaimed movie producer desperate for an Oscar; and Nico (the editrix of the glossy "Bonfire" magazine who is flaying under the relentless angst of having to reinvent herself). Each is facing her own version of the epiphany Bushnell describes as the female midlife crisis: that awful moment

when we realize it's time to grow up. It's a particularly stinging — and familiar — moment for women who live in a city like Manhattan, an environment where it's insanely easy (and socially acceptable) to inoculate yourself late into your 50s against reality by throwing yourself into your work, hitting the sheets with the never-ending supply of disposable men or simply downing the two cosmos it takes to convince yourself that everything's fine. "Like 'Sex,' none of the characters in 'Lipstick Jungle' are perfect," says Archer. "But I think that's what makes the rest of us — who aren't perfect — fall in love and root for them. The book is fantastically

PHOTOGRAPH BY DANIEL GARY



# book, next and the city

entertaining, but it's also a sophisticated, more grown-up follow-up to 'Sex and the City.'

Since penning the Observer columns that resulted in the book that led to the cult-inspiring TV series, starring Sarah Jessica Parker as Bushnell's alter-ego Carrie Bradshaw, Bushnell has done her own share of growing up.

At last week's power-babe cocktail party hosted by Tina Brown to fete "Lipstick Jungle," Candace (whose Manolo obsession makes Carrie look like an amateur) burst out laughing when asked whose gold stiletto sandals she was wearing.

"I don't know," she grimaced, archly aware of the irony that 10 years ago such a question would have sparked a half-hour dissertation on her fancy footwear.

As well as writing two best-selling books — "Four Blondes" and "Trading Up" — over the last decade, New York's whipper-thin and achingly stylish face of fabulous singledom married New York City Ballet principal dancer Charles Askegard on her 43rd birthday, July 4, 2002, after a whirlwind seven-week romance.

"We were all like, 'Can you believe Candace is getting married?'" says designer Nicole Miller, who has known Bushnell since her wild-child party nights in the late '80s.

"Then we were like, 'Wow, Candace really got married!' Now," says Miller, "we're all impressed that she made such a happy marriage." And just as Bushnell has a story about everyone in New York, everyone in New York seems to have a story about her nuptials.

Time magazine's Kate Betts, who struck up a friendship with Bushnell after assigning her to wear a rubber dress to a Hamptons party for Vogue, remembers the night the couple met.

"We were at a New York City Ballet benefit, and Candace came without a date but she had a bodyguard because she was wearing this huge diamond necklace. I saw Charles kneel down on the floor to talk to her and I told my

husband, 'That guy's really into her.' He didn't believe me. He went: 'That guy is a ballet dancer.' Well, guess who turned out to be right," says the Charlotte-sounding Betts.

The timing couldn't have been better.

"When I crossed that line of 40, I was single," Bushnell recalls. "I

remember going out one night, to a black-tie event, alone and deciding I had to make a choice. I wasn't a girl anymore. I could either think of myself as a sad old maid or a lady. I liked the lady thought more. It's clichéd, but in my mind a lady can go anywhere by herself. So that's what I chose to become."



Bushnell with husband Charles Askegard, a principal dancer with the New York City Ballet, whom she married after a whirlwind seven-week romance in 2002.

Married, but determined to avoid being smug, Bushnell remains a fixture on the city social scene, sometimes accompanied by Charles, but often surrounded by a gaggle of girlfriends.

She still, notes one eagle-eyed friend, uses her Louis Vuitton single-girl luggage. ("Nobody f---s with you when you're carrying Vuitton," Bushnell informed the friend.) "Candace continues to live by her belief that conformity signals death," says another pal, designer Cynthia Rowley.

"The biggest change I've seen in her since she's gotten married is that now she's trying to convince all her single friends to get married. She didn't do that in the past. I think it's a reflection of how happy she is with Charles."

Fern Mallis, head of the Council of Fashion Designers of America, who has

known Bushnell since the time "nobody was having sex and Candace started writing about it," puts the author's success at zapping the zeitgeist on paper down to the fact that she has stayed in touch with the source of her best material: herself and women like her.

"Unlike other writers who become successful, Candace didn't lock herself up in an ivory tower. Of course, marriage has given her plenty of new material, but she's always out there, living the vibrant life her readers want to know about."

Although the talk about "Four Blondes," and "Trading Up" being made into TV series came to nothing, insiders are predicting that "Lipstick Jungle" could soon become required Sunday night viewing.

Archer, who says she's bowled over by the early buzz about the book, won't go there.

Instead, she offers up her own prediction: "I bet 'Lipstick Jungle' shoots to the No. 1 spot."

N.Y. Post: Andrew Medwood



A regular on the NYC social and charity circuits, one of the keys to Bushnell's success, say friends, is her enthusiasm for mingling with the people she writes about.

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