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Haute Stuff

By **Venessa Lau**

NEW YORK — "Help me, Father, for I have shopped," began People magazine senior editor Julie K.L. Dam on the Monday entry to her blog, somalikeithaute.com. "I don't know how many Hail Marys are in order, or if they would even help a wretch like me. Because I was a bad, bad girl," she said in the voice of fictionalized alter ego, Alexandra Simons, before recounting a weekend buying binge that resulted in a "Prada hangover."

Although Dam, 34, said only that the spending spree was for "an upcoming event," it's safe to say that event is tonight's launch party for her roman à clef, out from Warner Books next month.

The book isn't the story of a girl who blogged and cashed in on a book deal to the dismay of her company higher-ups, though. Quite the contrary. "Some Like It Haute" is based on Dam's stint covering runway shows for Time Europe, which means the fashion industry has more to worry about than the honchos over at Time Inc.

Her Weblog — in which she posts photos of her spoils, like black Prada crocodile slingbacks — made its debut only seven months ago. The novel has been two years in the making, with its origins dating back as far as 1998, when Dam met her agent, Marianne Gunn O'Conner, who was then a publicist for Irish knitwear designer Lainey Keogh.

"I was obsessed with Lainey and wanted to do a story," Dam recalled during an interview last week at her office in the Time & Life building. "I interviewed her and went to visit [her studio in Dublin], then for some reason we just never did it. But I kept in touch with Marianne and when she became a literary agent, she encouraged me to write about what I know."

What she knows, as Dam has proven, is fashion.

She's the kind of woman, for example, who admits to having an Excel spreadsheet of her daily wardrobe schedule during fashion week. The book's protagonist, not surprisingly, has a similar habit. "Haute" opens with the disappointment — nay, panic — of Simons' having lost her Tuesday Manolos, which she was planning on pairing with Chanel trappings for the day's Chanel show. "What a disaster," Alexandra Simons says in the novel. "I could switch over to the Wednesday outfit, but then I'd be wearing vintage Yves Saint Laurent ... to a Chanel show, and that just wouldn't do. Not given the history between Saint Laurent and Karl Lagerfeld."

And that's just the beginning of the thinly veiled account of the runway mill. Protagonist Simons is a fashion editor for the news publication The Weekly, who went to a break-the-bank university more suited to Pulitzer Prize writing than hemline coverage. Harvard grad Dam, for her part, works for the weekly People magazine and now writes about music and weddings, having switched over from the fashion beat in 2000. "Mostly I do Britney stories," she said with a wry laugh.

Dam doesn't go so far in her novel as to actually name real editors, retail executives and publicists, but there are enough clues for industry types to string together the pieces — or at least have fun trying. The Sheraton sisters, for instance, are about as subtle as Chihuahua-toting in the front row.



Author Julie K.L. Dam

Photo by David Turner

Mostly though, Dam said she was kind of making it up as she went along. "I just had fun with it," she said. "It's not based on anything clearly reality." Indeed, while figuring out who's who makes for entertaining guesswork, the plot points in the book are so over-the-top and absurd that "Some Like It Haute" is more "Zoolander" than "Devil Wears Prada." There are "The Bachelor"-like reality show contestants, 007-esque kidnappings and a reclusive Peruvian-Swiss designer who's reachable only through secret passwords and a blindfolded drive through the Paris countryside.

"I actually did it on purpose," Dam said of the book's fantastic feel. "I'm not satirizing the real fashion world. I'm gently teasing it; it's a spoof." She points out the unique perch from which both she and Simons view the industry — as writers for news-centric publications rather than fashion glossies like Vogue or Harper's Bazaar. "You're sort of on the periphery. You're not exactly a fish out of water, but you're not quite in it."

So where does Dam stand when it comes to fashion obsessiveness now that she's no longer a fixture at the runway shows? "I would say compared to the average fashion person, definitely not as crazy," she replied, "because I'm not doing it 24/7 anymore. But compared to the normal person — out of control."