



By JJ Salem

Why queen of raunchy Hollywood fiction is my heroine

I WAS barely a teenager when Jackie Collins ruined me for life. It happened the day I discovered her book *Chances* in my sister's college apartment. The novel belonged to her room-mate, who was away on a beach vacation with a married man and I stole it with the rationalisation that the home wrecker would be better served reading a self-help book in the vein of *Smart Women, Foolish Choices*.

Prior to ripping into *Chances* I had existed on coming-of-age stories by Judy Blume, comic books and entertainment magazines so Jackie Collins's seductive brand of high glam, riotously raunchy pulp fiction was like crossing over to a forbidden zone.

It was *Dallas* and *Dynasty* on acid - exhilarating and, for me, transformative. Right away I knew that I wanted to do what she did - write guilty pleasure escapist fiction that shocked, titillated and held readers captive from first page to last.

What also drew me in was Jackie's author/celebrity profile. She was as beautiful and as take-no-prisoners as her ball-busting heroines and she instantly became my career idol. I remember being dazzled by her publicity junkie for *Hollywood Wives* (the breakout bestseller that made her a household name in America). Rather than fight me on the issue it was easier for my parents to just give in to my insistence on being late for school in order to watch Jackie make the media rounds on *Today*, *Good Morning America* and the *Merv Griffin Show*.

This was 1983. Young teens didn't have the spending power to wipe out the national debt of Chile yet and I purchased the hardcover edition of *Hollywood Wives* in instalments and then worked odd jobs and rode my bike back and forth to the bookstore, paying off the balance three or four dollars at a time. When the 500-page opus was mine to take home my excitement was total and two decades later I can still vividly recall the novel's cool lavender cover, the glamorous white font type - and the clerk's disapproving inquiry: "Do your parents know that you're reading this?"

This was a constant refrain from teachers, too. Jackie had a rich paperback backlog to devour and I shuffled from class to class with at least one of her earlier novels - *The Stud*, *The Bitch*, *The World Is Full Of Divorced Women, Lovers And Gamblers* - scorching the top of my textbook stack. At 15 I crafted a short story called *Tempt Me* for an English assignment. The plot focused on a sexually promiscuous party girl who ends up murdered by a psychopath obsessed with a provocative perfume. Confidentially, my teacher informed me that the effort was a knockout story worthy of the statewide student writing contest but the adult content precluded her from submitting it. Being barred from entry was thrilling. It made me feel like a baby Jackie Collins in training.

MY PASSION for Jackie's work stayed with me through high school, college and graduate school. I admired her prolific work ethic and the fact that she wrote for herself first, then for readers, giving little thought to critics. I also loved her bold stance in sticking to a voice and style that defied academic rules for fiction writing.

Her influence on me was profound. On the first day of my senior seminar in management at the University of Alabama School of Business, the professor asked each student in the class to stand up and reveal the one book that had impacted our lives the most. *The Bible*, *The Road Less Traveled* and *To Kill A Mockingbird* were among the more popular titles cited. I rose up to declare *Hollywood Wives*. Everybody laughed. I shrugged off the reaction with good humour but I was dead serious.

I spent several years honing my craft in genre fiction, publishing everything from suspense, romance, teen fiction and chick-lit to ghost writing. I was polishing my first real attempt at a Jackie Collins-type novel when I met her for the first time at a book signing in Atlanta.

The encounter was sublime, though I felt a bit like I was re-enacting a skit when they ask clients who are uninspired, unfulfilled, or ambivalent about their work: what did you want to be when you were 12?

Amazingly, that's where I landed 18 months later - at the same publishing house and with the same editor, too. An endorsement quote from Jackie Collins will even grace the cover of *Tan Lines*, my first all-out bid to claim the literary voice I knew was inside me when I got lost in *Chances* so many years ago. In pure career idolatry terms, it's a gorgeous full circle.

And it makes me believe that therapists and life coaches have it right when they ask clients who are uninspired, unfulfilled, or ambivalent about their work: what did you want to be when you were 12?

● JJ Salem's novel *Tan Lines* will be published by Pan Macmillan on May 9.



SEDUCTIVE: Author JJ Salem describes Jackie Collins's books as being like 'Dallas or Dynasty on acid'

Picture: TERRY O'NEILL/GETTY

The things they say...

I am in the very best of hands now but it is a fact that my initial diagnosis was that I was all right and had nothing to worry about.

Print-sized singer KYLIE MINOGUE on her cancer diagnosis

We need to do everything we possibly can to help people through what is undoubtedly a difficult period.

Chancellor ALISTAIR DARLING reflecting on the economic situation

If I had known what fun it is to be 83 I would have done it long ago.

Former Labour MP TONY BENN on his ripe old age

They tried to push me out of the way three times. They are horrible. They did not speak English. They were thugs.

LORD COE (below) head of London's 2012 Olympic Games, speaking about the Chinese 'heavies' on the torch procession through London



I am leaving the rest to God to get my revenge. But I am not doing anything any more.

MOHAMED AL FAYED, announcing that he has ceased to pursue his campaign to prove that Diana, Princess of Wales, and his son Dodi were murdered

I hope that's not the only thing I am identified with - taking off my clothes. I have done other things. There is a lot more to being Madonna than taking off your clothes.

A reflective MADONNA on her full and varied career

As Margaret Beckett will tell you, once you've lost the support of the Caravan Club it's time to go.

Comedian RORY BRENNER's analogy on FIA president Max Mosley who last week entered hot water

My Wisdens are the one feature of my library, indeed of my entire house, that I would not part with until every other money-raising avenue had been fully exploited. I would rather flog the dog

Lyricist SIR TIM RICE on his collection of the cricketers' almanac