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Kiddie book biz catty about celebs

Their names sell, but some consider them interlopers

By DIANE GARRETT

Getting in touch with your own inner child isn't enough in Hollywood anymore. Nowadays, performers vie to get in touch with *everyone's* inner child.

Children's publishing has become a hot-bed of celeb scribblings in recent years, with everyone from Harvey Fierstein to Julie Andrews to Jay Leno to Maria Shriver coming out with kiddie offerings.

The celeb influx has stirred up resentment in the once-cozy world of children's publishing, where book bizzers rail against interlopers eager to make a quick book. Equally irritating: well-intentioned stars who think they know best -- or better -- when it comes to kiddie lit.

More than a year later, bookworms are still rankled by Madonna's proclamation that she decided to write her books because she "couldn't believe how vapid and vacant" children's books are.

Lin Oliver, founder of the Society of Children's Book Writers & Illustrators, points to the wide body of existing kiddie lit and sighs, "As a society, we would have been fine without [hers]."

Book bizzers attribute the kiddie-lit surge to celebs' parental feelings and the pervasive (if muddle-headed) belief that children's books -- especially picture books -- are easy to write.

"People think, 'It's 32 pages; how hard can it be?' " says Kate Jackson, HarperCollins editor in chief of children's publishing.

"People have children, so they think they can write children's books," says Nicholas Callaway, the packager behind Madonna's five children's books. "It's one of the most deceptive things to get right."

Certain famous authors, such as Jamie Lee Curtis and John Lithgow, receive kudos for their commitment and craft. Julie Andrews, who fell in love with writing for kids after losing a bet to her daughter more than 30 years ago, even created her own imprint at HarperCollins.

But far more are dismissed as one-hit wonders.

Joanna Cotler, Curtis' longtime editor, chafes at slipshod celeb offerings, calling them "very aggravating to me. I'm trying to do something with integrity."

Publishers are not exactly blameless: They're eager to trade on famous names at the cash register, rationalizing it as a means of underwriting riskier fare. They say they try to consider celeb author proposals on their own merit and avoid getting caught up in their publicity potential.

"What we try to do here -- we publish a lot of celebrity books -- is pick one we would normally publish anyway," says Simon & Schuster's David Gale, who edits Lithgow and Fierstein.

While it's great to have a marquee name on a dustjacket, some wonder, did the celeb *really* write the book? Editors say stars are like any other writer: Some require more drafts and tougher line edits than others.

"There's a great deal of editing back and forth," says Callaway, who, in a strange bit of showbiz logic, first encouraged Madonna to write children's books after working with her on her "Sex" tome. At that point, however, the Material Girl didn't have children and wasn't ready to take up the pen.

And while rumors about ghostwriters persist, insiders play down their existence in this particular book realm. They note that the money isn't

that great -- advances average around \$20,000 to \$50,000 and occasionally hit six figures -- and the intent's often well-meaning. Madonna, for example, donates her proceeds to charity.

"It's not always about the money with celebrity children's books," says Firm lit agent Alan Nevins, who's repped Henry Winkler and Marlee Matlin on their chapter books.

"You make the money on sales, not the advance," says Oliver, co-writer with Winkler of the Hank Zipzer series, which they're adapting for a Nickelodeon pilot.

Publishers agree on one thing: A celebrity has to promote a kid's book for it to really sell. Packager Byron Preiss, who's created a cottage industry out of celeb children's books, says he learned that the hard way when Sting refused to plug a children's book benefiting the rainforest.

Preiss, whose first celeb project was written by Paul Simon and edited by the late Jackie Onassis in 1991, has had more luck with celeb scribes such as Jerry Seinfeld, who has sold more than 200,000 copies of his Halloween-themed picture book.

Gale says publicity duties are so vital they're written into celeb kiddie lit contracts.

"One of the reasons besides the merit of the book that attracts us to the book is the opportunity to promote," agrees Harper senior sales veep Andrea Pappenheimer. "If a celebrity is not willing to promote, it won't sell."

Callaway designed an ambitious global publicity campaign to maximize sales for Madonna's picturebooks, with Penguin Putnam handling Stateside duties. The first was launched last September and the second two months later, followed by the third, "Yakov and the Seven Thieves," June 21.

"I saw a world of opportunity to approach this as the sort of thing

Hollywood would do on an installment basis like 'The Matrix,' " he says.

Callaway's gamble paid off: The first two have sold more than 1 million combined and "Yakov" hit No. 7 on the New York Times bestseller list for picture books its first week (landing five notches behind Billy Crystal's ode to his granddaughter).

Curtis, who has sold about 3 million children's books since 1993, piggybacks lit and pic promo ops. Lithgow, meanwhile, incorporates his books into his stage shows for youngsters. Their efforts have earned both respect in the field.

"What people don't understand about celebrity authors is that there's a lot of resentment against them, especially among aspiring authors, but also among booksellers and certainly the press," Gale says.

Book bizzers don't expect the star juggernaut to slow down any time soon, either.

"Children's books used to be the poor stepchild," Oliver says. "Harry Potter redefined the whole thing."