
Archive: Jackie Collins

Sex “sold” for *Jackie Collins*, but it was the emotional honesty of her writing that kept readers hooked for almost half a century. *Alexandra Heminsley* considers the enduring legacy of Hollywood’s naughtiest novelist.

Photograph: Jackie Collins, 1964. © Pierluigi Praturlon/Reporters Associati & Archivi/Mondadori Portfolio/Bridgeman Images



Collins' first novel, *The World is Full of Married Men*, was branded "nasty, filthy and disgusting" by fellow romance writer Barbara Cartland.



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For a woman so associated with sex and decadence, Jackie Collins' day-to-day routine would have surprised many of her fans. She worked, writing in longhand with a black felt-tip pen, every day until her death in 2015. She went to bed early. She filed promptly. According to Suzanne Baboneau, managing director of Simon & Schuster UK and Collins' line editor since 1980, she "knew the value of a deadline, and always delivered a wonderfully clean manuscript."

Although Collins—with her Armani pantsuits, her panther-bedecked desk, and her iconic house designed to look like David Hockney's *A Bigger Splash*—epitomized Hollywood glamour to so many, she was in fact a hardworking Brit who, as Baboneau puts it, had "a real morality about her."

Born in Hampstead in 1937, she was brought up with her sister (the actress Joan Collins) on London's Marylebone Road. Her father was a theatrical agent, and she would regularly listen in on him and his friends discussing the women in their lives over card games. "From an early age I got the impression of the double standard, and I have been writing about it ever since," she told *The Guardian* in 2011.

This sense of being an observer—in the room but one degree removed from the action—stood her in good stead throughout her life. Collins moved to California in her

early 20s to live with Joan, who was making a mark for herself in Hollywood. But Jackie didn't enjoy life in front of the camera, preferring to watch the machinations of the industry from afar while nursing her ambition to write.

She was in the habit of starting novels and abandoning them, only completing one once she had the encouragement of her second husband, Oscar Lerman, a night-club impresario and founder of Tramp on London's Jermyn Street. Collins' first marriage had been stormy, ending after four years. Her husband had been bipolar and died of an overdose not long after they parted. But when Lerman read a few pages of what would become *The World is Full of Married Men*, he pushed her to complete it. The novel was an immediate best-seller, shocking and delighting audiences in equal measure. Each of the 31 novels that followed also became *New York Times* bestsellers, her sales eventually topping 500 million. She also helped her sister's career by writing the novels that would land Joan iconic roles in *The Stud* and *The Bitch*.

What was it that enabled this increasingly straitlaced figure, married to Lerman for over 26 years, to write such raunch? She fuelled the boom in "shopping and fucking" novels of the 1970s and '80s, and continued to ride that wave for decades. She blithely bypassed sub-



sequent publishing trends including the family dramas popular in the '90s and the chick lit boom of the 2000s, not only taking her original readers with her but finding a new generation too.

One explanation for Collins' enduring popularity was her genuine passion for storytelling. She cited Dickens as an early inspiration and longtime favorite. "I loved the fact that he had all those different characters," she explained. A Dickensian love of colorful characters and far-fetched plot twists was something she successfully replicated within her own genre, says Baboneau. "She wrote dense, layered novels. She was a proper plotter. You can put people in Versace or Gucci or whoever but you can't pull it off for 30 books if that's all you've got."

Authenticity was also a key factor. "The sex in her books was real," explains Nigel Stoneman, her long-standing UK publicist. "She used to smile and say that she never wrote about anything she hadn't done herself, witnessed or had been told firsthand." This policy didn't leave her short of options: From her early forays into Hollywood living (including a teenage affair with Marlon Brando), to her later seat at the bar in Tramp, she had a truly peerless view of life behind the velvet ropes of LA and beyond.

Yet no matter how eye-poppingly filthy her sex scenes got, one thing her female characters all had in common was that—like Collins—they were hard workers. "Her heroines were not in the kitchen or the shops all day, they were out there running hotel complexes and movie studios," says Stoneman. "Those characters had things to do every day beyond falling love," agrees Baboneau.

This ambition in her female leads left the falling in love—and, of course, the sex—to be just that. Free from a quest for courtly knights or wealthy businessmen to look after them, her heroines' romantic lives shimmered with self-expression, emotional release and wild passion. She never skimped on detail. While the white-sheeted sophistication of '90s literature and the gawky comedic bunk ups of the new millennium sailed by, Collins was there with pages of sweat, flexibility and flesh slapping on tanned flesh.

She did it all without a trace of irony. Where so many other genres can only engage with women's sexual selves from beneath a veil of either cynical humor or furrowed academia, Collins took these wom-



Collins disliked the "mommy porn" label assigned to women-oriented erotica. As she once challenged: "When your husband is at the computer, do they call it 'daddy porn'?"

en—and the women reading about them—seriously.

Their passions mattered to her, and her readers knew it. Collins' heroines were what readers wanted to be on their very best days.

Summer 2019 saw *Three Women* held up as a groundbreaking examination of female desire. Where many saw a "must read" nonfiction book of the year, filled with revelations about women's sexuality, others saw the ground covered as dispiritingly well-trodden, the women chronicled so very preoccupied by male desires. I fell more in the latter camp, having learned at the altar of Lady Collins: My teenage self felt something truly radical on reading the opening pages of *Lovers and Gamblers* as our heroine Dallas is introduced. She's admiring her own bikini-clad body in a full-length mirror prior to taking the stage at the Miss Los Angeles beauty pageant. Without a flicker of anxiety, she thinks to herself that she "deserved to win. There really was no contest." There was—and still rarely is—anywhere else on the literary landscape where women are so uninhibited in not just their desire but their delight in their own bodies.

Collins herself did not work out—a bit of swimming and table tennis being all she would admit to—and did not seem to feel any pressure to conform to the highly specific California aesthetic. When pressed by *The Guardian*, she responded, "I must be incredibly confident, because I've never felt that. You see these women and men—the whole plastic surgery thing—and they've got these little fat cheeks, they look like chipmunks. And you're like, 'Why are you doing that? What's the purpose?' I don't get it. Perhaps it's an English thing."

Perhaps it was an English thing. Like Hockney, whose *A Bigger Splash* she was so frustrated never to be able to buy, she somehow managed to be as British as fish and chips while creating art that glistened with LA exoticism. "When I was a kid growing up, I used to read my father's *Playboy* and I'd see these guys and they had fantastic apartments and cars. I have all of that now," she told the Associated Press in 2011. And yet every time Collins landed in the UK, Baboneau tells me, she "made a beeline to M&S Marble Arch for prawn sandwiches and then Boots for a top up of No7 Protect & Perfect." She really did know what women want.