

Readers lose themselves in
her best-selling fiction;
she finds herself on Key Biscayne



AT HOME WITH SUSAN ISAACS

COMMENTARY



ANA VECIANA-SUAREZ

Dame Edna wasn't funny this time

We all know the medicinal value of laughter. A good chuckle clears the air, draws song from silence. In my book, a sense of humor is one of the prime qualities I would look for in a mate. After all, how can we get through life, through this valley of tears, without a healthy bit of levity?

Sometimes the best satire is the one aimed squarely between our eyes. The one that elicits an snort. The one that, between hiccups, makes us nod in recognition. The ability to laugh at ourselves is a blessing. A blessing and an affirmation. Nothing like a joke to writing hope from despair. Don't you think? So I thought.

I've been musing about the purpose — and the caustic sting — of humor since one of my sisters forwarded me an e-mail about Dame Edna. Yes, possesses, that Dame Edna, the one with the

BY ILES SI ANA, K

ESCAPE FROM NEW YORK

BY ELLEN KAMNER
Special to The Herald

The Atlantic view from Susan Isaacs' Key Biscayne condo is terrific, but what the New York novelist really loves are the palm trees.

"Ever since I can remember, palm trees have made me happy," says Isaacs, whose wry, witty mysteries have been making best-seller lists since 2004's *Compromising Positions*.

Views places in the neighborhood and a palm-shaped lamp on her desk echo the expanses of tropical trees outside her 20th-floor Ocean Club apartment.

"I love writing here," she says. "I look up and there's that view."

Isaacs lives on Long Island but cherishes her monthly escapes to her second home on Key Biscayne. She worked with decorator Judi Main and the result, with its tiled floors and tropical accents, is "warm, casual, cheery — just what I love about Florida."

Here, Isaacs gets a break from "the normal Storm and Drang of life. The weather's gorgeous. I go out in the morning and I swim or I walk, and I've gotten the worst part of the day over — exercise."

She grim. "I'm a snort."

Not exactly. Isaacs is the author of nine novels, a book of nonfiction and two screenplays, including the film adaptation of her 2008 novel *Shining Through*. She's a member of the international writers' group PEN, president of Mystery Writers Association of America and chair of the nonprofit literary organization Poets and Writers.

BY ILES SI ANA, K

PHOTOS BY
JARED LAZARUS/
HERALD STAFF

IT'S NO MYSTERY: Writer Susan Isaacs, author of best-selling detective fiction, loves the ambience on the beach and at her home in Key Biscayne, left.

PETS

Personality Change

What's an owner to do when a gentle dog turns feisty in old age? **2K.**

COOK'S CORNER

Make Mine Malanga

A reader seeks — and gets — help preparing malanga and other tropical vegetables. **6K.**

ETHNIC EXPLORER

Romanian Rovel

Enjoy the robust flavors of 'Mid Europe' at Hollywood's Transylvania Restaurant. **4K.**



Menswear designers adding luxury, formality and flair

BY A. SCOTT WALTON
Cris News Service

NEW YORK — Like rival designers stalling the same prep, the menswear designers whose shows set New York Fashion Week in motion last weekend pounced on the chance to win new customers from divergent angles.

The Sean John, John Varvatos, Nautica and Kenneth Cole previews of fall and winter styles demonstrated ways to boldly add luxury, sex appeal, formality and flair to a wardrobe.

Each collection stemmed from nonconformist ideals.

"I decided going in that, this season, Sean John had to be different," said the label's founder, Sean "P. Diddy" Combs, after the show, as he prepared to jet down to Atlanta for the NBA All-Star Game festivities. "But a designer has to own the top."

What shows restraint is, of course, a matter of opinion. Combs' dramatic tendencies were expressed fully. The most profane lines of dialogue from the film *Training Day* and four-floor blared during his show and raucous rock and rap snippets, video walls beamed footage of machine gun massacres and Dante's Inferno; and, to keep the capacity crowd captivated, the collection relied heavily on cashmere long johns with studded silver flies, distressed leather chaps and billowing flares.

Both Cole and Nautica's design chief, David Chu, are less inclined to risk-taking. Yet each showed collections marked by novelty. Cole drew inspiration from the dandy dressed British "mode" of the 1960s. Coats, suits and sweaters were tautly tailored, and slacks fit high on the waist and tight on the leg. Outfits were accented with silver Chelsea boots. Taking the minimalist approach, Cole worked mainly with black, white and gray.

Nautica's Chu staged a still-life presentation in three segments — rugged outerwear typified by distressed leather duffel coats, sporty ensembles combining preppy blazers, yachting vests and cargo pants and sleek, lady suits paired with violet shirts and ties that conjured up the sharks from *West Side Story*.

"All I can do is suggest change and then sit back to see how the consumer responds," Chu said.

Varvatos, menswear's new media darling, made more of a declaration about masculinity. Daringly, he showed a slew of fluidly cut suits in red wine shades. And he showed a doll head at giving corsetry and velvet a lightweight appearance. Jackets were broad-shouldered and double-breasted in the back. The slouchy patterns were a subdued mix of grays on browns, greens on blues.

The designer was pleased. "This collection had me excited about going to work every day," Varvatos said. "Hopefully it will generate excitement when men see it, because without excitement there's no incentive to buy."



FABRIC'S IMPORTANT: A model wears a brown stretch wool travel jacket over a yellow nylon half zip shirt; another wears a tomato cotton nylon zip jacket with a granite-colored velvet pullover.



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PHOTOS BY JARED LAZARUS/HERALD STAFF

AUTHOR AL FRESCO: Isaacs, top, reads on the patio of her Ocean Club condo on Key Biscayne. Above, a few of her mystery novels.

ISAACS FROM NY

But that's all back in New York, where she has a bigger office and a busier life, "where even if I turn the phone off, I feel it vibrate."

In Miami, she can relax and indulge her passion for palm trees, which she traces to her first visit here as a teenager.

SUNNY AND ROMANTIC

"I came with my parents and was just enchanted," she says. "Palm trees are everything sunny and romantic. One of the reasons I can tolerate San Francisco, the most self-conscious of cities, is they have palm trees."

She and her husband, trial lawyer Elkan Abramowitz, bought the condo four years ago. They come here for a few days or a few weeks each month, dining out and going to movies and theater.

They wed 15 years ago, but Isaacs still has her eyes at the thought of having the secret to a happy marriage.

"The institution of marriage sounds like a dark, gray building," she says. "It's a relationship, continuously negotiated."

Isaacs, 59, has the wry humor of Judith Singer, the *Compromising Positions* heroine she reprised in 2001's *Long Time No See*.

"We're both suburban housewives, fairly close in age," says Isaacs, which, as she writes in *Long Time No See*, is "what the French call *une femme d'un certain age*.... [A]lthough I still have the smooth olive skin, dark hair, and almond-shaped eyes of a mature extra in a Fellini movie, my dewy days are over."

Despite the similarities, Judith isn't an alter ego, the author says.

Judith's character closest to my own reactions, but when she's reacting, I'm looking through her eyes," Isaacs says. "I don't want to write about myself."

BRAVE DAMES

And she doesn't want to write about winners or victims. Her characters may be smart-alecks, but they're also smart. And bold.

"The women who've really impressed me or touched me have been brave dames," she says. "They stood up to fear and danger, whether they triumphed or not. They're women who like other women, who care for something beyond what women are traditionally supposed to care about."

It's a brave dame (or, in the case of her 1996 *Magic Hour*, a brave guy) Isaacs has in mind when she begins writing.

"Character comes first," she says. "I write fictional biography, the most telling part of that individual's life, a time when they're tested.... Brave dames come naturally to Isaacs, being one, herself.

She demurs: "I've led a traditional life — I'm married to the same guy, you don't trade in your kids, I still live in the suburbs."

But bravery takes all shapes. In

the mid-60s, when all her friends were engaged or married, Isaacs had a career as an editor at *Seventeen* magazine.

"I arranged that for myself," she says. "I wanted something more." Galvanized by Betty Friedan's *Feminine Mystique*, Isaacs wanted all women to want more.

"Feminism just made my life," she says. "It created an atmosphere even in the suburbs where I felt I had a choice. I wasn't the lone scout — I had a platoon behind me."

A platoon could also describe Isaacs' vast and diverse readership. They range from her aunt in Sarasota to "a reader in Bulgaria reading

the Bulgarian translation [of *Almost Paradise*] to a 30-year old guy in prison... because it was the last thing left on the shelf. He liked it," she says.

He's not alone. While her protagonists tend to be women, "guys do 'less up to reading my stuff. This whole 'It's a guy thing' makes me so nuts. It's another form of narrow-mindedness, if not prejudice."

Isaacs maintains a website (susanisaacs.com) where readers can communicate with her.

"They say, 'I liked the book,' or 'How do I get an agent?' or 'Are you the Susan Isaacs who was a cheerleader at Arizona State?'" She smiles. "No."

Isaacs enjoys hearing from readers, but says she doesn't write with them in mind.

"If you write for your readers, you're like a woman who tests herself up in a different way to please each man, so you lose yourself," she says. "I tell myself the story so one else has written that I really want to read."

PHINEAS THE CAMEL

She has loved reading since her girlhood in Brooklyn.

"When I was 7, my mother got me my own library card."

Her father shaped her storytelling career, too.

"He made up terrible stories like Phineas the camel who bit his nails and Throckmorton the lamb who didn't want to brush his teeth."

Isaacs passed on that love of stories to her own children, Elizabeth and Andrew, and to Nathan, Andrew's 2½-year-old son, whose snapshot adorns the refrigerator in her spacious kitchen.

"I've become another besotted post-menopausal woman," Isaacs says. "I just want to show people pictures."

She also likes to show off South Florida to guests, taking them to Vitzaya, the Wolfsonian and for an afternoon spin down Collins Avenue and Ocean Drive.

"I know there's the nightlife and everything, but the colors are fabulous, and the architecture. It's got to be seen."

SOME WORK, SOME PLAY

Now at work on her 10th novel, Isaacs hasn't forsaken South Florida in her fiction, but, she says, "Just working in Miami is like having parentheses around the writing life. On either side of the work there's warmth, water, nature's wonders, razzmatazz, great restaurants, theater, music, dance. I pop across the bridge pretty often."

If her visits here have a drawback, it's having to deal with Miami's notorious humidity.

"Every day is a bad hair day," she says, swearing her curls.

Then, from the comfort of her oversized couch, Isaacs turns and smiles out at the palms. Frits is forgotten; all is forgiven.

Ellen Kanner is a Miami writer.