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Capitol Hill Siren's Tell-All Fiction

By Jonathan Yardley, whose e-mail address is yardleyj@washpost.com Tuesday, May 24, 2005; Page C01

THE WASHINGTONIENNE

By Jessica Cutler

Hyperion. 291 pp. \$23.95

Here comes "the Washingtonienne," all set to get Washington smoldering again less than a year after she did so for the first time -- and with a book that, believe it or not, isn't half bad. Last summer a young woman named Jessica Cutler got her allotted 15 minutes in the spotlight after a Web log that she put together for the amusement of a few of her friends was picked up by a considerably bigger blog, Wonkette. Faster than you could say "Paris Hilton," Cutler's tales of high-octane sex, D.C. style, were all over the place. Cutler was fired by the senator for whom she worked -- Mike DeWine (R-Ohio) -- and instantly became the talk of the town, Capitol Hill most particularly, since it was there that much of what she did had been done.

Tuesday, May 24, 2 p.m. ET
The Washingtonienne: A Novel
Washington Post book critic Jonathan Yardley discusses former Senate staffer Jessica Cutler's fictional account of racy goings-on in the nation's capital.

After a few stories in the newspapers and a few appearances on television, Cutler vanished. But if you've been wondering where she was, here is the answer: working on "The Washingtonienne," the "novel" she hurriedly wrote to cash in on her eclat -- 15 minutes more! -- before it totally evanesces. Word last year was that she'd gotten an advance well into six figures for Telling All, and now here it is, just in time for summer in Rehoboth and Ocean City, nearly 300 pages of juicy and occasionally amusing Washington gossip as told through the anti-litigious filter of fiction.

"Novel" is in quotation marks for the obvious reason: Apparently just about the only fictitious things in "The Washingtonienne" are the names. Everything else appears to be a literal account of Cutler's adventures, from her college years at Syracuse to her brief fling on the New York nightclub scene to her arrival in Washington, where she finagled a job on the Hill, merrily hopped from bed to bed and got what passes for a comeuppance in this city, where the only crime is getting caught and the rewards for hanky-panky are lavish: notoriety, airtime and a fat book contract.

"The Washingtonienne" is proof positive that the book industry, when it sniffs the rich aroma of profit, can fling aside its 18th-century ways and boogie with the big boys. Ordinarily it is the dumbest business on the planet, taking nine months to a year -- or more -- to shepherd a manuscript through editing and production, a process that involves endless expense-account lunches at which absolutely nothing is accomplished, sales conferences (sometimes in exotic locales) at which editors' immense egos are stroked and/or destroyed, and the demolition of whole forests to print news releases that nobody reads.

But when it comes to Washington's version of "Sex and the City," the good folks at Hyperion, Cutler's publisher, really moved. Why, a year ago no one had heard of her except the friends with whom she gossiped and the men whose libidinous needs she serviced, yet now she has her very own book, featured in prime locations in all bookstores -- and just wait until she starts hitting the talk shows. The buzz will be louder than the 17-year cicadas. Goodbye Jane Austen, hello Instant Messenger. As for the lucky author, the only thing to say is: Way to go, Jessica.

What's even more remarkable than this publishing coup is that a quarter of the way through, "The Washingtonienne" gives hints of being lively, funny and agreeably in-your-face. Eventually it runs out of steam, but for a while Cutler -- in the voice of Jacqueline Turner, her singularly unheroic heroine -- sticks pins in a lot of deserving targets. Washington itself, for example, is "an easy place" for sex because, lacking "those industries that attract the Beautiful People, such as entertainment and fashion," being "full of young single people and bored married people," even a girl of modest looks can find plenty of action.

Then there's Capitol Hill, where "they're always hiring, just like McDonald's." Precisely what people do there is anything except clear -- "Maybe somebody somewhere was working hard, but I only knew what I saw: lots of people with way too much free time on their hands" -- enabling them to be "the biggest gossips I had ever encountered: It was junior high with BlackBerries and Instant Messenger." Once she lands a job there, she catches on very quickly:

"I noticed that a lot of people in the office kept a 'Me Wall' in their cubicles, these little photo galleries of themselves standing next to Congressman So-and-So, Senator What's-His-Face, and Governor Whoever. As if that was supposed to impress anyone. Like, 'Wow! You got to stand next to some unrecognizable person who is way more important than you are! That's awesome!'"

As for the guys, "Take one of these bottom-feeders, put him through grad school, sell him a cheap suit, *and* you had your typical Capitol Hill male. According to [her friends] April and Laura, these guys watched themselves on C-SPAN when they got home from work at night, bored their dates with anecdotes about the congressmen they worked for, and had framed pictures of themselves with people like Dan Quayle." As for the big names, "We spotted George Stephanopoulos and James Carville in the restaurant before our martinis had even arrived. 'How sad is that?' Laura mused. 'Those are the biggest celebrities Washington has to offer, and they're not even attractive.'"

So there you have it: just about all the highlights from "The Washingtonienne." Most of the rest is a not especially interesting variation on the chick-lit theme, though with a good deal more explicit (yet oddly uninteresting) sex than usual. In any case, you know the rest of the story. Cutler/Turner gets involved with a guy named Fred, married and holding a fairly influential position in the Bush administration, who hands her an envelope containing \$400 in cash after each amatory encounter; with Phillip, a sixtyish but well-endowed lawyer who has a high-end house in Georgetown; with Sean, a bicycle messenger who's got muscles to die for; with Dan, a sleazy guy in the first Hill office where she's hired; and then with Marcus in her second office, who likes to spank and be spanked but is otherwise a real sweetie pie, the only one of them she likes.

She thinks of the money and other favors these men bestow on her as "compensation," or "financial assistance," as Fred puts it, and even though April tells her, "It's hooker money," she insists, "It's an *allowance*." Not until late in the game, when Fred gets to her apartment at night and subjects her to a quickie, does she have second thoughts: "Fred had given me approximately \$20,000 in cash since our arrangement started, but this was the first time I ever really felt like a whore. Up until tonight, I believed that I was just a very lucky girl who happened to be at the right place at the right time."

Her qualms seem to have been fleeting. The book could just as easily be called "No Regrets" as "The Washingtonienne," and in fact that would be a whole lot less of a mouthful. If Cutler's only regret is that the advance for the book wasn't even bigger, that's her business. When one considers the outrages perpetrated every day in the back rooms of the Capitol and the sleek offices on K Street, her bed-hopping is a peccadillo at worst. And if "The Washingtonienne" isn't much of a book, it's a better one than many of the ghost-written tomes that Washington bigfeet claim as their very own.

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