

BOOK REVIEW



RICO MENDEZ / The Chronicle

Reviewed by Sarah Coleman

Helen Fielding, the author of "Bridget Jones's Diary" and "Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason" is widely credited with being the progenitor of "chick lit," the genre in which self-absorbed single women talk fertility and Fendi in the same breath. So it might come as a surprise to readers to learn that before she created Bridget Jones, Fielding wrote a satire with a heroine as mature, capable and self-aware as Bridget is naive, blundering and neurotic.

CAUSE CELEB

By Helen Fielding
Viking, 342 pages,
\$25.95

"Cause Celeb," which was published in England in 1994 and has just been published in the United States, may have come first, but it's the grown-up sister to the "Bridget Jones" franchise. The novel tells the story of Rosie Richardson, a publishing-house publicist (or "puffette," as she calls herself) who

Sarah Coleman was recently named one of five finalists for the National Book Critics Circle's Nona Balakian Citation for Reviewing Excellence.

HUNGRY FOR ATTENTION

Celebrities aid
famine victims in a
shrewd satire by the author
of 'Bridget Jones's Diary'

ditches a glitzy lifestyle in London to manage a refugee relief camp in Africa. Inspired by Fielding's own early-career experiences of producing TV documentaries in famine zones, "Cause Celeb" captures the absurdities of a media culture in which famine victims' chances depend on the caprices of movie stars and supermodels.

Fielding and famine? It seems a precarious combination, but the surprise of this shrewd novel is that the author keeps vaulting over the high bars she sets for herself. By the book's end, she has managed to pull off both an edgy political satire and a satisfying romantic comedy, the two threads pulled together by a heroine who's genuinely admirable.

In reading "Cause Celeb," it becomes clear that somewhere between her debut novel and her first best-seller, Fielding's writing underwent a subtle shift. In the Bridget Jones novels, Bridget's unreliable narration is a source of much of the humor: Because she's so clueless about her motives, Bridget becomes the butt of her own jokes. By contrast, Rosie's self-deprecation stems from too *much* self-knowledge, not too little. "The reason I first got interested in Africa was because I fancied some-

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one. That's about how saintly I am, if you really want to know," she confides in the novel's early pages.

The "someone" is Oliver Marchant, a suave and successful television presenter whom we see in a series of flashbacks. Rich, handsome and ferociously intelligent, Oliver provides Rosie with a ticket to London's "Famous Club" — but at a price. Being with him, she comes to realize, is like being on a seesaw that "keeps lifting you up high then banging you down on the tarmac, so that all your most sensitive inner parts are bashed about and broken."

Because she's young and hopeful, Rosie goes a few rounds on the seesaw. But then, showing a sense of purpose that would make Bridget want to clonk her on the head with a bottle of Chardonnay, she wises up and decides that "Africa could do a lot for me."

Once in Nambula (the fictional African country where most of the novel is set), Rosie has no time for crushes or navel gazing. The camp she's managing is near the border with war-torn Kefti, and as the novel opens, a locust plague in Kefti is threatening to send thousands more refugees across the border. The crisis has happened at the worst moment, since a UN food shipment has been

delayed due to political maneuvering between different aid agencies.

Rosie, who has spent the past four years getting the camp to a point of "contented mundanity," isn't prepared to see it go back to famine conditions. Knowing that celebrities could help her cause, she flies back to London, and, with the help of her old lover, corals a set of the vainest stars this side of a Robert Altman movie.

This is where the novel's satire kicks into high gear, and Fielding makes easy meat of her shallow celebrities. They range from supermodel Nadia (whose constant refrain is "This feels real, you know?") to aging diva Kate Fortune, who spends her entire trip to Africa moaning about a bad hairdo.

Though broad, the humor is far from superficial. "Cause Celeb" might be a comedy, but it's also fueled by genuine bewilderment about the way famine victims can be subject to the whims of politicians, non-governmental organizations and media organizations. Fielding obviously knows the turf, and she doesn't soft-pedal her outrage.

As Rosie struggles to pull off

her 11th-hour appeal, she has to face the consequences of bringing the media and Third World politics together. There's her colleague (and romantic prospect) who believes that "putting out images of celebrities wandering amongst famine fields is an obscene symbol," and the television network that demands a precisely timed crisis. Then there's her contact with Oliver: a delicate dance in which she must tap his resources without being pulled back into his romantic orbit.



Helen Fielding is the author of "Bridget Jones's Diary."

Where we were invited to laugh at Bridget's bad judgment, we never doubt Rosie's good sense. When Oliver tries to exploit her for sexual favors, she has a quick answer: "Oh, sod off, you revolting old madman." When apathy and bitchiness threaten to derail the charity appeal, she does what any professional woman would do: identifies the problems, works the phones, and reminds herself that "my shoulders are narrow, but my bottom is broad."

Fielding humanizes the refugees without resorting to knee-jerk political correctness. Muhammad Mahmoud, the camp's unofficial spokesman, is an edu-

cated man who cares deeply about the fate of his people, but he's also a media-savvy pragmatist. Faced with a jaded television crew, he delivers a heartbreaking speech about drought, pride and starvation, only later taking Rosie aside to wink and ask, "How did I do?"

Of course, this is still a romantic comedy, and it has the same Jane Austen-inspired plot structure as the Bridget Jones books: Two men, a decoy and a dark horse, vie for the heroine's affections, while everyone else throws spanners into the works. But nobody could doubt that Fielding is using a wider lens. It's as though Elizabeth Bennett had volunteered to go to the Napoleonic Wars as a nurse.

Ironically, "Cause Celeb" is unlikely to be as big a hit as "Bridget Jones's Diary," for a reason that Rosie would recognize: Famine is too much of a downer. Despite Fielding's best-seller status, it seems probable that fewer women will be drawn to a novel set in an African refugee camp than to one that mirrors their own urban, Western lives.

That's a shame, because they'll be missing out on a genuinely astute novel, one that offers a worthy showcase for Fielding's gifts. If readers do warm to "Cause Celeb," there's even a chance she'll treat us to more female leads like Rosie, whose lives are as vivid and multilayered as those of real-life heroines. ■