

Isaacs' ordinary characters make 'dream' a reality

By Sue Mason
staff writer

A quick look at Susan Isaacs and you see nothing extraordinary.

Encoined in a booth at the Caucus Club in Detroit recently, she looked like a typical suburban housewife — two kids, three dogs and a husband who commutes to work — who was spending an afternoon in the city.

Appearances aside, Isaacs is anything but typical. At the age of 44, she is jetting to Los Angeles for a meeting, touring Australia and England and rubbing elbows with the likes of Shelley Long and Judith Ivey.

Isaacs has made a name for herself as an author in a business where many are called, but few are chosen for the best seller list. Since 1979, she has written three best selling novels and two screenplays. Her most recent effort, "Shining Through," recently hit the shelves of local book stores.

She's the Long Island, N.Y., "housewife" who has "made it" and who says of her success: "Feeling famous feels suspiciously like not feeling famous."

It has been a combination of talent and luck that has brought Isaacs fame and fortune. (The movie rights for "Shining Through" have already been bought by Columbia Pictures for actress Deborah Winger.)

Her writing career started at "Seventeen" magazine in the '60s. The pay was dismal, but she got "to do interviews and not be a secretary." A constant turnover in employees meant a slow, but steady four-year climb to the position of senior editor of teen features, not quite a meteoric climb to the top of the publishing heap, but a fun climb nonetheless.

ISAACS MARRIED trial attorney Elkan Abramowitz in 1968. Her departure from "Seventeen" came in 1970, when she was eight months

pregnant with their first child Andrew.

Torn between being a writer and staying home to raise her family, Isaacs struck a compromise. She stayed home and did occasional freelance work and speech writing.

"It's not easy to do," she said of the work. "You have to be assertive and self-propelled to call people and tell them why they desperately need you. I never earned more than \$3,000-\$4,000 a year and yet somehow I wanted to be called a writer, but with a hyphen . . . a writer-hyphen housewife."

Her first novel was "Compromising Positions," the story of a Long Island housewife, locked in a dull marriage and bored silly, who blossoms into a female Sam Spade when a local politician is murdered.

It took a year to write. "The only time I could write was between 9 and 12 when my daughter went off to nursery school. I'd have to set an alarm clock to bring myself back to reality when it was time to meet her bus." It mirrors a theme that is evident in much of her work — the ordinary woman doing extraordinary things.

Isaacs' luck was her husband's college roommate. An editor at Simon and Schuster, he read the manuscript then gave it to an agent to read.

"On one hand I was afraid and on the other hand the minute after I gave him the manuscript I was waiting for him to call," Isaacs said. "I wavered between it being absolute drivel and absolute brilliance, but deep down in my gut I had a pretty good sense that it was a good book."

"YOU HAVE to have an extraordinary belief in yourself, especially if you're at all honest about your craft and not just interested in the big bucks."

Looking back on her entrance into the realm of novels, Isaacs admits that short of getting published, the hardest thing to do was getting an



ELLEN S. ABRAMOWITZ

agent.

"The whole trick is getting an agent," she said. "If you're not lucky like I was, you have to do a lot of research."

Since that fateful day, she has written "Close Relations" about a political speech writer who is suddenly thrown into the race for governor after the incumbent chokes to death on a liver knish and "Almost Paradise," the story of a boy from old money New York family and a girl from a working class Cincinnati who meet in a university theater group and fall in love.

She made her debut as a screenwriter with "Compromising Positions" and followed that up with the script for "Hello Again."

Her latest effort, "Shining Through," is a change of pace. It still promotes ordinary people doing extraordinary things, but is a period piece.

Set during the years of World War II, her heroine is an unlikely bilin-

gual legal secretary from Queens, who's concerned with world politics and in love with her boss.

Fame and fortune has change Isaacs' life somewhat — "on the outer parts," she says. She is fussed over and finds it great fun and glittery, but like the ordinary people that inhabit her novels, the essence of her life is still her husband, children, extended family and friends.

WITH "Shining Through" in print and its promotional tour well underway, Isaacs doesn't have time to rest on her laurels. She has a screenplay two-thirds done and has two more novels to write. She already decided her next novel will be a mystery.

"I write stories that I want someone to tell me," she said. "It's a challenge, a challenge to succeed and either you have it or you don't and you don't know until you do it."

"The ultimate question is what is a story. It's a structured daydream and daydreaming is a common human need."

'Shining Through': No ordinary delight

By Sue Mason
staff writer

It sounds preposterous — a legal secretary becoming an unsung hero during World War II and finding true love in the process.

Maybe not, considering history books forget to mention the contribution women made to the war effort. Oh sure, we know about Rosy the Riveter and the doughnut ladies at the canteens, but when it comes to the "shoot 'em up bang bang" stuff, the names banded about are masculine.

Susan Isaacs' latest novel is as she says a story of an ordinary woman doing extraordinary things.

Linda Voss, a part Jewish bilingual secretary and, as she describes herself, "an old maid," is working herself ragged for a Wall Street lawyer who's interested in her only after his wife leaves him and for only one reason — sex.

She, on the other hand, is madly in love with him. It's a case of one thing leading to another that makes these two strange bedfellows . . . for awhile.

LINDA IS caught up in the war. While her fellow secretaries eat their lunches in the law firm's conference room and talk about nonsensical things, she's more concerned with what's happening in Europe. She devours newspaper reports of the fighting and hankers to find someone as concerned as she is about the impending war.

She finds that person not in her boss, turned lover, turned husband John Berringer, but in Edward Leland, a dark and sometimes frightening law partner who borrows her German language skills to send cryptic messages abroad.

The threesome eventually leave

Wall Street for Washington to work for the OSS. There, faced with an unfaithful husband, she decides it's time to make her contribution to the war effort by being a spy in Berlin, despite the protests of Edward Leland.

For 1 1/2 years she conceals her identity and sends valuable information back to the Allies, but in the end she faces the same problems most spies face — getting caught. But Linda's spunky and rises above her problems — and there's plenty for her to face — to get out of Berlin.

Isaacs is a masterful writer. She uses words like an artist uses oils to create a picture that seems very real. There's none of the dull and long, drawn-out commentaries in this book. It moves at a steady pace and throughout, the conversations are down to earth and real.

You can easily picture a group of secretaries meeting at lunch to bandy about the latest office gossip and the nose-in-the-air snobbishness of New York's high society.

THERE ARE times you want to tell Linda to dump darling John, but you know it's not necessary. She's in control. And so is Isaacs.

It seems almost needless to say that this is a good book. Then again, Isaacs wouldn't be doing a cross country promotional tour, if it wasn't. She's made a name for herself as an author and "Shining Through" is a good example of why.

If there's one regret about this book, it's that it had to end. Isaacs leaves you hankering for more. There's a wish to see the look on John's face when he sees her true love and to see how she fares with the man of her dreams.

On second thought, no. It's best to leave all that to the reader's imagination.

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