

struggles to patrol the beat to which it has been assigned. Neither Congress nor the White House—Republican or Democratic—seems inclined to strengthen the regulators. Tepid reform legislation enacted in the wake of Enron did little to deter the reckless schemes that gave us the subprime mortgage mess. Business journalists, I can

confess from within that fraternity, are overly consumed with anointing corporate superstars. Too rarely do we have the fortitude to disentangle telling footnotes in securities filings when it counts—before, rather than after, the bankruptcy courts take over and shareholders are ruined.

Call me a pessimist, but my view is that

human nature being what it is, we can expect more Enrons, and more perp walks. ▾

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## B O O K S

## A Tale of Two Detectives

While preparing to interview Cecile von Ziegesar, author of the wildly popular *Gossip Girl* series, for a London newspaper, Lauren Mechling '99 spent a week in the “young adult” corner of a New York City Barnes & Noble. She hadn't been in that section in a decade, by her estimate, and what she found surprised her. The moralizing tone of the books she remembered from her own teenage reading was gone. “It seemed like the books were really being written for teenagers, not for their parents to buy them,” she says. “There was something kind of ‘Wild-West’-y about it.”

Those visits prompted Mechling (pronounced **meck**-ling) and her friend Laura Moser to write a trilogy about a Texas girl who moves to Manhattan. Their first book, *The Rise and Fall of a 10<sup>th</sup>-Grade Social Climber*, has sold more than 30,000 copies since its publication in 2005. In 2006, Mechling began writing her first solo novel, *Dream Girl*, the story of a high-school student whose strange but predictive dreams help her slowly unravel a mystery. It was published in July.

The young-adult section of a Barnes & Noble is not a bad place for a book to be. While the rest of the industry shrinks, the Association of American Publishers estimates that sales of hardback juvenile titles, which include young-adult and children's books, have grown 4.6 percent annually since 2002. “I guess it's really been in the last 10 years,” says Mechling, “that the average age of young-adult authors became a lot younger, and closer to that of the readers themselves.”

Although a former reporter herself—first in Canada, and then in New York City for the *Sun* and

*Wall Street Journal* (where, in her current job, she commissions essays for the paper's Friday leisure section)—Mechling says she doesn't approach writing for teenagers as another form of journalism. “I don't hang out with teenaged girls,” she says. “I think it would come across as really fake and condescending if we sat down with our notebooks and watched *One Tree Hill* [a teen television drama] and said, ‘All right, this is what the teens are into now. Let's write about that.’” She simply trusts that what she finds funny or touching will resonate with her readers.

Reporting and detective work both require keen powers of observation, though, so Mechling describes Claire, the heroine of her new novel, as a journalist who just doesn't know it yet. “It's about a girl who's always noticing little things,” she explains. “And unlike in my life, where you notice little things and you file them away and that's the end of it, in Claire's case they actually end up leading her into the most fantastic adventure.” But Claire does share one of her author's childhood memories. While visiting grandparents in Florida, Mechling opted not to go to the beach with the rest of her family. Instead, she sneaked around the apartment building, putting an ear up against the neighbors' doors and taking notes on what sort of deli meat they wanted on their sandwiches. She ended up caught and in trouble. So does Claire.

Claire's adventures, like those of many young-adult heroines, will continue in a sequel, *Dream Life*. Mechling notes that publishing houses often push authors to continue writing about popular characters, but she sees another reason for creating a series as well, that gets to the heart of why young people read: “I think there's a smaller space between their heads and the page. I think they really dive into these imaginary worlds with a greater sense of immersion and a greater sense of intensity. And I think they become personally attached to the characters they're reading about.” She suspects that teens would rather read a dozen books by a beloved author than a book each by a dozen critically acclaimed yet unfamiliar writers.

Mechling says that writing young-adult books has been immensely rewarding. “You don't do this for the money. You obviously don't do it for prestige,” she explains. “I just do it because I love the satisfaction that comes from writing something that I think is very funny, or something that I think is very sweet.” Even so, there are those who still ask her when she's going to start her great American novel. “I definitely want to shake people when they ask that,” she says, “to just sort of guide them by the hand and show them all these great books that are coming out. If they understood, they wouldn't say, ‘Why don't you go write a 600-page meditation on isolation and dystopia?’” She likes her corner of the bookstore just fine. ~PAUL GLEASON



Lauren Mechling writes in the thriving young-adult genre.



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