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## Bright Dims, Ficera Shines

Elizabeth Allen reviews two  
new books of personal essays

**"H**ooray, another book by Susie Bright!" I said when her latest essay collection, *Mommy's Little Girl*, crossed my desk. Having read two of her earlier works, I expected another thought-provoking book infused with Bright's zest for life and sex.

Well, I was wrong. Instead of open-minded and free-spirited, Susie now comes across as egotistical and, frankly, boring. *Mommy's Little Girl: On Sex, Motherhood, Porn & Cherry Pie* is not only as disorganized as the clunky subtitle suggests, but also inconsistent. Some essays read like sloppy first drafts, others like polished prize-winners. One minute Bright's writing effervesces; then it goes flat like stale champagne in the next chapter. Overall, it's a disappointment.

*Mommy's Little Girl* shows an occasional flare of the old energetic Susie, but mostly the book founders under a new self-importance. In "The Birthing Day Party," for example, Bright sidetracks daughter Aretha's tenth birthday by telling the guests in excruciating detail how Aretha was born. Did the kids really want or need to see photos of Bright's cervix progressively dilating? I doubt it. I think she just wanted to show off her uterus.

The rest of the essays suffer the same wild mood swings. "Old and in the Nude," a celebration of the naked, aging human form, follows snarky columns about how to ruin your sex life. Bright handles the history of vibrators with deft, incisive humor, then slips into ponderous navel-gazing when writing about a friend's planned self-euthanasia. I really, really wanted to like this book, but as I read through it, I wanted to throw it across the room in frustration.

"Farmer in the Dell," which closes out "My So-Called Sex Life," almost compensates for the mediocrity of the foregoing

**Mommy's Little Girl:  
On Sex, Motherhood, Porn  
& Cherry Pie**  
by Susie Bright  
Thunder's Mouth Press  
January 2004, 169 pages

**Sex, Lies and Stereotypes:  
An Unconventional Life  
Uncensored**  
by Kim Ficera  
Kensington Publishing  
April 2003, 266 pages

chapters. In this essay, Bright gets personal about tension between her latex-clad, young, and tight "Susie Sexpert" image and the real, 40-something, graying Susie Bright who wants a loving fuck. She deviates from her book tour for a hookup with an Internet flame, the farmer of the title. Leaving her authorial persona behind, she makes love with the farmer, and, for once, her writing rises to the moment:

"The farmer rested his weight on me and pressed his palms — not rough, just right — on the hollows of my shut eyelids. I felt myself sink deeper into the cloud, in absolute darkness, the pressure of his hands blotting out every other thought except my ache, and his cock inside my pussy. I felt close to tears, and that was a relief sweeter than orgasm. Offstage at last, sweet and bottomless. I'll never write another book again."

Why didn't Bright leave out the professorial pretension, the transcripts of all her uninteresting conversations, her cutting remarks about how to crash one's sex life? Why didn't she return to this passion, this intimacy, this shining gladness? Sex-positiveness is Susie Bright's strength, but we'll have to wait for a better book than *Mommy's Little Girl* to feel that glow again.

After Susie's self-consciously ritzy adventures, Kim

Ficera's *Sex, Lies and Stereotypes: An Unconventional Life Uncensored* is such a relief. Countering the trend of cool, acerbic, snarky memoirs, Ficera writes with an even-handed and down-to-earth tone.

Going against the grain of indulgent self-analysis, *Sex, Lies* exhibits a welcome maturity. In one of my favorite essays, "Into the Woods," Ficera, age 10, sets off hunting with her father and male cousins. Ficera's father, clueless about how to entertain his attention-starved daughter, leaves her alone to shoot and to snowmobile. Finally he takes a balky Kim to a place that "beats the dump": the slaughterhouse. Kim proves her tomboy toughness by agreeing to go in; her dad beams, but then Kim pukes. So much for quality time.

You can't really claim that Kim and her dad end up with a closer bond. Looking back, however, Ficera writes, "In his own peculiar way, [Dad] loved the dump, the wood and wildlife — alive or gutted." As an adult, she understands her dad's squeamish fascinations and her own childhood need for his approval ("I was a good son. For a girl, that is."). In contrast to Susie Bright's "Birthing Day," where the parent appears as a fount of wisdom and the 10-year-old kid is precocious and liberated, Kim Ficera's "Into the Woods" shows relationships that are messier, but more realistic. Thus there's more humor ("I've got a real treat for you! ... Yep, it's a slaughterhouse!") and more humanity in Ficera's book.

Where Susie Bright seems obsessively self-absorbed, Kim Ficera comes across as accessible and nice. She may be a famous columnist with an "unconventional life," but she's had her ups and downs just like everyone else. While Susie Bright is flying up above in *Celebrity Heaven*, Kim's on your level, and you like her for it. If I ever write my autobiography, I'd like it to be like Ficera's: wry, mature, matter-of-fact, smiling. ▼

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