

Arts And Leisure: 'Unzipped' is a step in the right direction

by Arthur Salm

Jake at last seems on the brink of cracking the best-seller list - and with any luck, breaking it wide open.

Actually, writer Brian Alexander, 48, hasn't been Jake, Glamour magazine's (formerly anonymous) dating-advice columnist, since 1996. But with "America Unzipped: In Search of Sex and Satisfaction," he has taken his reluctantly won reputation as a go-to guy for naughty stuff - he's currently the twice-monthly "Sexploration" columnist for msnbc.com - and fashioned it into a swift, smooth, contemplative and frequently hilarious travelogue through America's surprisingly mainstream nether regions.

WHAT MAKES AMERICA TICK - Author Brian Alexander works out of the office in his San Diego home. He hopes that his third book, 'America Unzipped,' will have 'more than woo-hoo! sex interest.' CNS Photo by K. C. Alfred. "America Unzipped" is Alexander's third book. The first two, "Green Cathedrals: A Wayward Traveler in the Rain Forest" (1995) and "Rapture: How Biotech Became the New Religion" (2003) were well-done, enjoyable reads. Both tanked.

"'Rain Forest' was sort of its own niche," Alexander said, sitting behind a desk in his partially finished, on-hold office in the San Diego home he shares with his photographer wife Shelley. "It was really meant to be a little book about interesting things that happened to me while traveling to research stuff for magazines. A little book with a little advance. Not much was expected of it.

"I had obviously hoped that 'Rapture' would do better. Everything that could have conspired against the book, did. It got shifted from publisher to publisher and became something of an orphan, for one thing. And it came out the week the U.S. invaded Iraq."

In "America Unzipped," Alexander said, "there's definitely a woo-hoo! sex interest, but a lot of what's embedded in there is about our culture as well as about sexuality. It's getting closer to what I actually want to do."

Which is, specifically, to write good stuff on American culture. He writes frequently not only for Glamour, where he's a contributing editor, but for Wired and Outside as well.

One of the reasons he likes writing books, he said, is that books have become a replacement for long-form magazine writing. Still, he does have some elbow room - more than most writers are given - in his magazine outlets: "I'm fortunate that Glamour will let me do a 4,000- to 5,000-word story, Outside a little longer sometimes. You're allowed to have detail and depth. And you're allowed to make the writing fun."

The more serious nature of his current Glamour gig may come as a surprise to people who consider it just another glossy rag on the newsstand. But last year Alexander won a John Bartlow Martin Award for public interest journalism, presented by the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University, for the Glamour article "New Lies About Women's Health," about the government and the religious right putting out misinformation on contraception and reproduction.

So Alexander is gaining traction, and hoping "America Unzipped" gets off to a fast start. He passed up a larger advance to go with Crown/Harmony as the publishers because "they have the resources (to promote the book), and they seem enthusiastic. That was more important to me than the advance. 'America Unzipped' definitely has a wide appeal, but a lot of books get published and there's a limited number of worker bees to go out and push them.

"I guess you could call my condition right now one of nervous anticipation. If it does well, it'll open up a lot of opportunities."

Like what?

"A novel, maybe. I'd don't know if I'll try it, but I'd like to. My agent said, 'You think you're underpaid now?'"

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