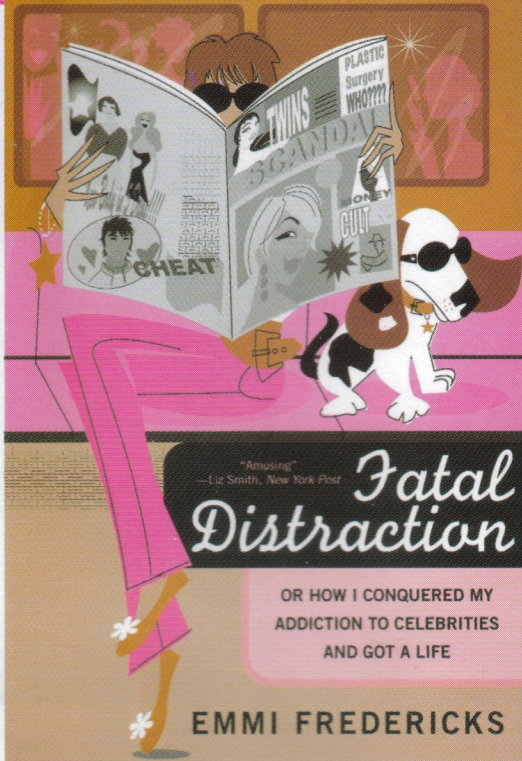


back to reality

By Iris Wiener



Novelist Emmi Fredericks stops living vicariously through celebrities and starts living for herself

“Celebraholism:
a complex psychological disorder characterized by an excessive, compulsive need for exposure to celebrities”

—Emmi Fredericks

Emmi Fredericks was always infatuated with celebrities. But it wasn't until a fateful moment four years ago that she realized her unhealthy obsession with the rich and famous was keeping her from her dreams. Here she talks to *figure* about finding her passion for writing and getting her own life.

When did your celebrity obsession begin?

When I was a young girl growing up in New York City, my parents took me to lots of Broadway shows. I saw *Gypsy* at age 8 and thought, “This is it; this is where the important people are: onstage.” So I tried out for all my school plays, thinking, “Oh, I’ll win a Tony by the time I’m 20, an Oscar by 25, and then somewhere in my 30s I’ll win the Nobel Prize....”

So you wanted to act?

I did, but I soon realized that I wasn't a great actress. I was much more comfortable focusing on other people's talents than on my own. My real skill was writing—stories, plays, essays. In college I remember watching an amazing young theater student—a prodigy, really—do a reading onstage, and I thought, “That girl loves acting like I love writing.” But I never had enough confidence to share my work. So instead of becoming a writer, I figured I'd be a stage manager. If I couldn't be in the spotlight, at least I'd be around the people who were.

How did this focus on celebrities affect your life?

After graduating from college, in addition to pursuing a career as a stage manager, I spent an obscene amount of time reading trashy tabloids and watching entertainment





Left: Emmi Fredericks at age 4.
Below: Eight-year-old Emmi riding the subway in New York City. "I was already in the throes of celebrazholicism," she says.



TV shows. I was convinced everyone else had a life far more thrilling than mine. I remember calling my friends in the early 1990s and very seriously asking questions like, "Do you think so-and-so is sleeping with so-and-so?" as if that were the most important thing in the world.

How did you finally realize your obsession was unhealthy?

While stage-managing a play, I developed a huge crush on the lead actor. I spent my workdays trying to get him to notice me—I was obsessed with the idea of becoming his personal manager. Then one day I had to go to his dressing room to discuss a change in the script. I was literally shaking because I was going to have to talk to him. When I started to speak, he looked right through me—he couldn't have cared less. At that moment I realized that I didn't really exist for him—I was just a little blip on his radar.

Did that make you feel bad?

Actually, the experience was freeing. I realized at that moment that I didn't want to be some marginal figure giving other people attention and adulation. The incident made me understand that I had to put *myself* at the center of my life.

Is that when you started writing?

Yes—I decided to get out of the theater scene. I wanted to write; it truly satisfied me. So I got a day job as a secretary and wrote at night. Every evening, no matter how tired I was, I sat down and wrote two pages of my novel.

Once you finished the novel, was it easy to find a publisher?

Not at all. My first three novels were rejected by every one. Finally, Thomas Dunne Books offered to publish my third novel, *Fatal Distraction*. I was thrilled.

It sounds like a long process. Did you ever want to give up?

Surprisingly, no, because I loved what I

was doing. When you're pursuing something you love, it doesn't matter who is watching and who approves. I'd still be writing even if I'd never been published because I love it—it's my passion. Getting published merely allowed me to quit my day job.

Fatal Distraction is about Eliza, a woman who's obsessed with celebrities. Is it autobiographical?

Eliza thinks famous people are worth more than she is, which is how I used to feel. Writing the book helped me scrutinize my own celebrity obsession and get over it. But Eliza never develops her own passion, like I have. She's just a fun, light character—I like to think I'm a bit more developed.

Do you think there can be a healthy celebrazholic?

As long as you have a life while watching other people's lives, celebrazholicism isn't always a bad thing. I joke that people who claim they never pay attention to celebrity gossip are like people who never drink wine or eat dessert—maybe they're very admirable, but they're also very boring. But make sure to find your own success—then you won't become too obsessed with the success of others.

Emmi Fredericks is the author of *Fatal Distraction, Or How I Conquered My Addiction to Celebrities and Got a Life* and *The Smart Girl's Guide to Tarot*. She lives in Queens, New York, with her husband and basset hound, Ziggy.

