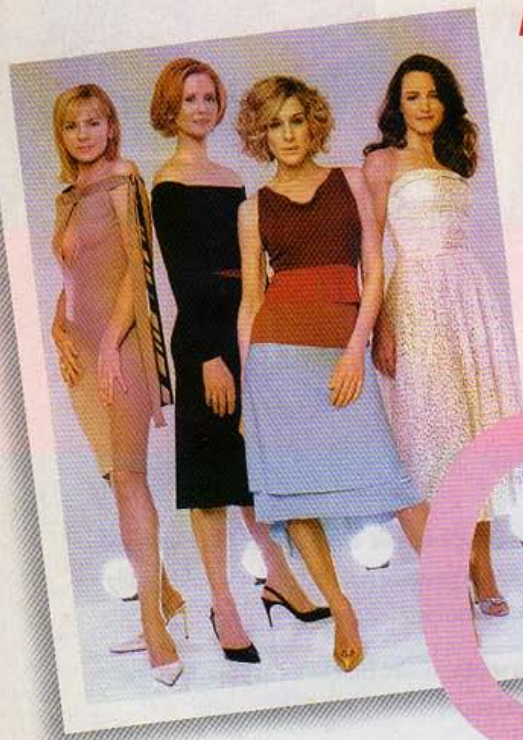


SEX AND THE CITY AUTHOR CANDACE BUSHNELL

Cinderella AND THE CITY

To everyone's surprise, *Sex and the City* creator Candace Bushnell has swapped single life for marriage to a ballet dancer. Now she's on her way to Australia and talks here to friend and writer Karen Moline.



Above: The *Sex and the City* cast (from left) Kim Cattrall, Cynthia Nixon, Sarah Jessica Parker and Kristin Davis. Opposite: Candace, 44, and her ballet dancer husband Charles Askegard, 34, married a year ago.

Candace Bushnell has two distinct personae. One is Public Candace, she of the indefatigable energy, tousled blonde mane and whippet-thin frame, who is frequently seen smoking a million ciggies, downing Cosmopolitans and air-kissing just about everyone at the exclusive parties she's invited to on a nightly basis – the parties which fuelled her razor-sharp insights about *Bad Behaviour By Bored Babes*, which turned into *Sex and the City*. And then there is Private Candace, who gets up early to hammer away at the computer about the events she's witnessed the night before, and spends most weekends avoiding city slickers at her modest rented home in decidedly un-chic rural Connecticut.

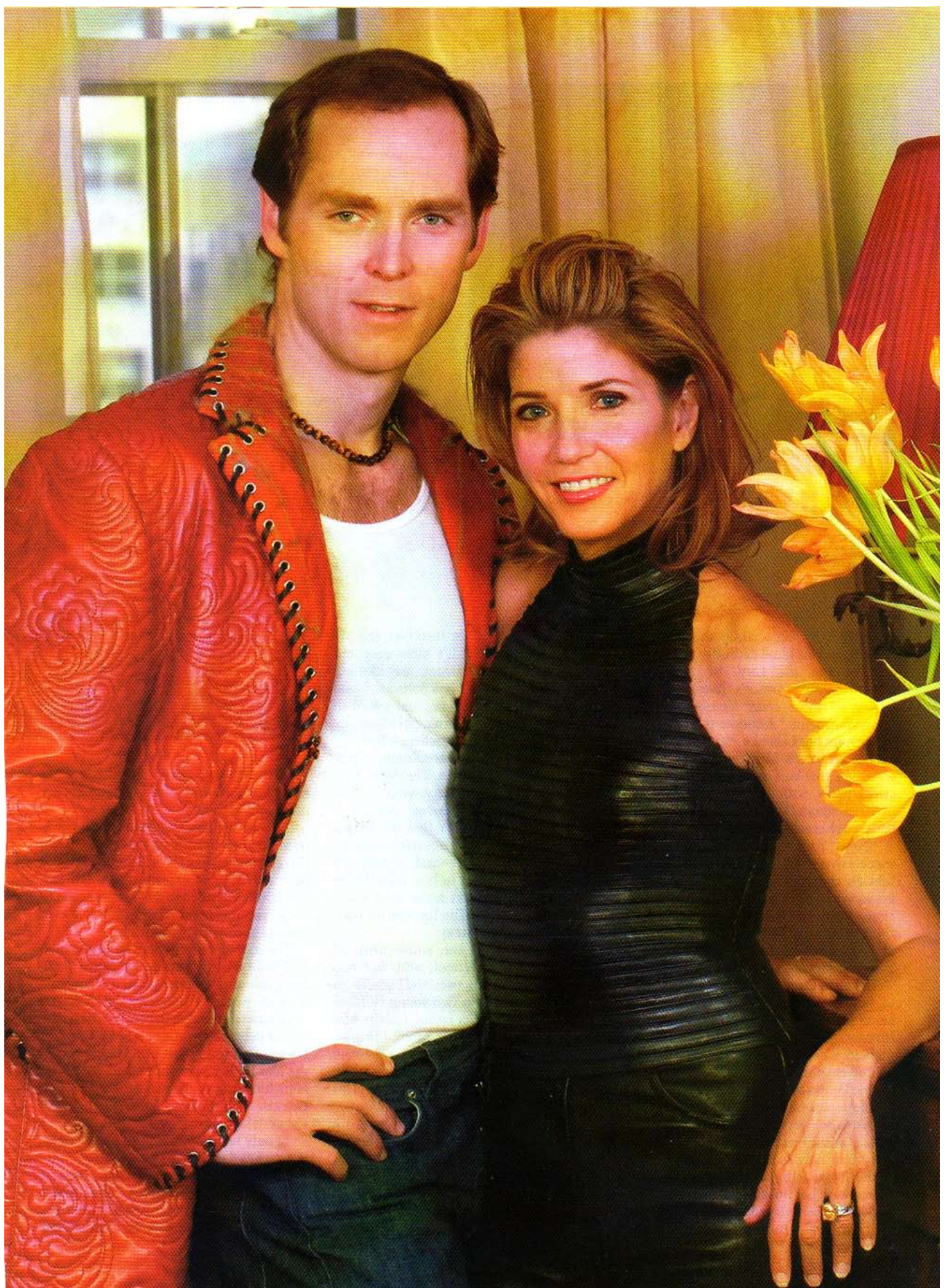
Public Candace's columns and novels about the rich and infamous have been cruel to be kind. Private Candace is a cream puff with a wicked sense of humour, who hates working out, loves to eat bacon for breakfast, is a loyal and generous friend and the best shoulder to cry on about matters of the heart.

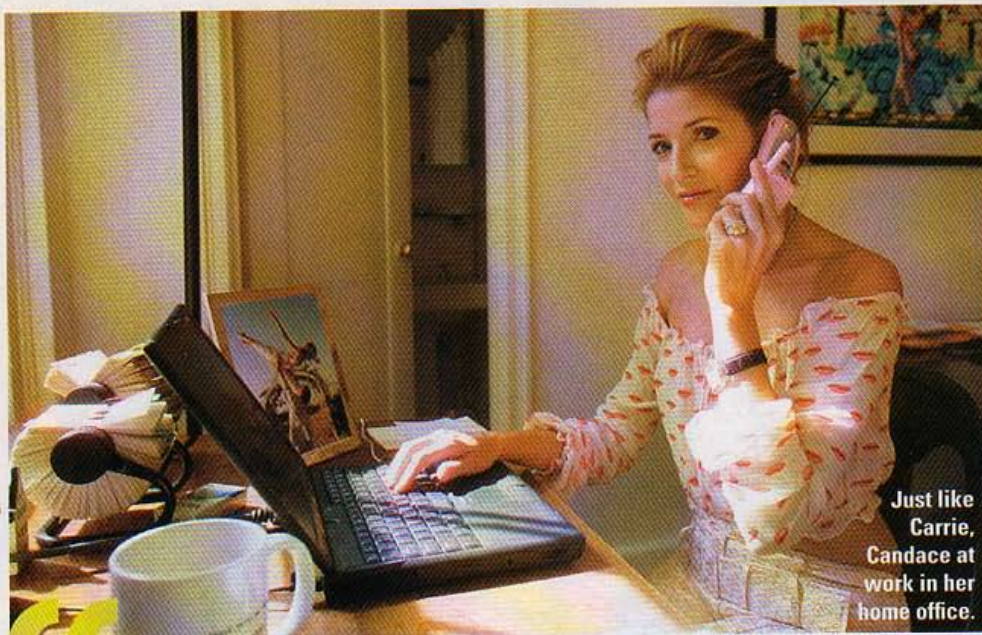
Public Candace's size sub-zero body is a walking billboard for designer gear. Private

Candace jokes about her lack of cleavage. Once, when we were working in Los Angeles, we took a break and were lounging by our hotel pool. "I feel like the Jolly Green Giant next to you," I moaned. "Oh, sweetie," Candace said, "don't be ridiculous. You're normal. I'm the freak. Besides," she added, peering at her chest, "you've got breasts."

When Candace and I met years ago, we were both struggling writers, and I've seen how hard she's worked to perfect the style that (jealous) critics decry as too flip or too facile. Her gift is a genius for zoning in on the foibles of the rich and (wannabe) famous, and dissecting social behaviour with such unerring precision that *Sex and the City* became and remains an international phenomenon.

Candace's deft skewering of mating rituals turned Carrie, her alter ego, and Miranda, Charlotte and Samantha into every-girls living through the Sheer Hell of Being Single in New York. The *Sex and the City* TV show became such a Bible of Dating that men who watched it assumed that all NY women would gladly disrobe on a first date, while women wondered why the ladies on the show were always involved with ▶





Just like Carrie, Candace at work in her home office.

It truly was a kind of Cinderella moment, where you look at each other and have this flash of recognition.

sensitive boyfriends while they endured one horrendous blind date after another.

"*Sex and the City* did come out of writing for women's magazines and having all those crazy relationships and disappointments," Candace tells me now, as she hugs her Labrador, Betsy Lou.

The weather's filthy outside and she's wearing a grey knit cardigan over a T-shirt, sweat pants with her name spelled out in large square letters on the bum, and battered sheepskin slippers.

"New York is a city which values success over everything, so it brings out the best and the worst in human nature, which is why it's like a character in all my writing. Here, people are willing to do all kinds of things you never thought they would do." She lights up a cigarette. "Of course, when you are a success, people are a lot nicer."

In truth, Candace has always managed to be exuberantly audacious while still being nice and that's part of her secret to success. She's obsessed not by the more malicious kind of gossip, but in the reasons behind naughty behaviour.

She knows a huge number of interesting people because she's fun. She's just naturally charismatic, yet never full of herself, I realise, as she hands me a cup of herbal tea. We are talking in the dining room/office of the lower Fifth Avenue apartment she shares with her husband of one year, New York City Ballet dancer Charles Askegard.

It's a lovely, unpretentious space, but

surprisingly small. The furniture and art is classic and simple. It's more cosy and functional than extravagant, just like her country house, which has polished wood floors, chintz-covered sofas, and a pool so overheated it's like swimming in a bathtub.

After writing two bestsellers – *Sex and the City*, a collection of her columns which first appeared in 1994 in *The New York Observer*, a media/society weekly, and *4 Blondes*, her blockbuster novella – and about to launch her first full-length novel, *Trading Up*, Candace has joined the rarefied echelons of top-paid writers and could certainly afford to buy more living space. Yet Candace has never been about material acquisition. She has always been about cerebral acquisition.

She grew up in the small town of Glastonbury, Connecticut, with her two sisters, Alyssa, a composer, and Deirdre, an engineer and mum to two young children Candace dotes on. Her father, Calvin, was a rocket scientist and her mum, Camille, worked as a travel agent, then real estate broker. They're the kind of parents who were encouraging rather than critical, which helps explain why Candace is lovely.

Even when Candace went to New York University and, at the age of 18, briefly moved in with her then-beau, Gordon Parks, an acclaimed photographer and the director of the original 1971 *Shaft* movie (he was also African-American and 60 at the time), they were pleased for her.

"Oh, Gordon was just the coolest guy," Candace said. "And my parents are pretty unflappable."

As was Candace's ambition, although it took her years to build up a portfolio. "I had this epiphany when I was eight that I would be a writer," she explains. "It's not just something I decided to do – I was chosen to do it. The most real relationship I've ever had has been with my writing."

She started writing about hangouts such as Studio 54 for a magazine called *Beat*, and graduated to more plum assignments at such women's magazines as *Self* and *Mademoiselle*, and then became the writer for the *People Are Talking About* section at *US Vogue*. It was at that time she concocted the idea for her *Sex* column and, soon after launching it, met the real Mr Big, aka Ron Galotti, then the hard-boiled publisher of *Vogue*. (He is actually quite short.)

"I only went up to talk to him because my friends dared me to."

Luckily, she acted on that dare, because "Carrie's" often fractious relationship with Mr Big fuelled many of her columns. When they parted unhappily, Candace had



Charles and Candace in their New York living room with their Labrador, Betsy Lou.

an enviable string of attractive beaus. The last serious one before her marriage was Stephen Morris, an English venture capitalist who took her on holidays around the world.

"With all those relationships we've agonised over, the truth is, you just can't force it. If it isn't right, if a man doesn't call or isn't interested, there is very little you can do – you have to move on," she admits. "The great thing for us as women is that we live in a time where we can date and enjoy sex and not be condemned for it.

"If you meet your soul mate early on in life, I think it's fate – rare and unusual. Every person is born with a story, and along that journey you'll make certain choices, where you end up either happy or sad. But they're still your choices. They all brought me to my new book. And Charles."

Candace met Charles because she had the guts to fly solo. After splitting with Stephen Morris, she dated for a few months, bought a \$3000 ticket to a New York City Ballet gala, got an outrageous chiffon dress from hot designer Roberto Cavalli and had her hair and make-up done.

"It was something I always wanted to

do," she explains, "although I complained to the make-up artist that I didn't want to go and I was never going to meet anyone, and she said, 'You never know!'"

Candace ran into an old friend she hadn't seen in 20 years and he introduced her to Charles. "It truly was a kind of Cinderella moment, where you look at each other and have this flash of recognition," she says, beaming. "It hadn't happened to me before, not like that. And that night we actually said we really liked each other and wanted to see each other again."

"She's right," Charles tells me with a laugh. He's tall, lean and exquisitely toned, with eyes the same piercing shade of blue as hers and an equally easy smile. "Our eyes met and boom! I'd never felt that way before. Everything about her attracted me."

Even better, he had no idea who she was. "I'd seen the show, but I was so immersed in the ballet world that I didn't meet many women outside of it, even though I didn't want to date dancers any more. And then I thought, oh, she wants to meet me?"

Six weeks later, Candace and Charles were married. She was 43, he was 33.

The media went into a frenzy. When the perennial *Sex and the City* bachelorette bit the bullet it was quite a shock for all those singletons still dreaming of Mr Right. Yet Candace and Charles are blissful; I've never seen her so calm and radiant.

"We both have the same work ethic and really satisfying careers," Charles says, "so we give each other the space we need. We're there for each other because we love each other and want to be together, and it's as simple as that."

Charles is often away from home dancing and Candace is about to embark on a three-month book tour. "I do put a lot of pressure on myself, and with *Trading Up* I was trying to do a more classically structured novel," she explains. The heroine, Janey Wilcox, who first appeared in *4 Blondes*, is not like Carrie Bradshaw, who's easy to love because she's kind and vulnerable. Janey is more like Scarlett O'Hara in *Gone With the Wind*, or Becky Sharp in *Vanity Fair* – a lot more wicked and a lot more fun to write about. A sequel is in the works. No doubt it will be as juicy as Candace herself. **W**

● For a review of *Trading Up*, see Book Club, page 226.