

Judith Krantz, Whose Tales of Sex and Shopping Sold Millions, Dies at 91

By **Margalit Fox**

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Judith Krantz, who almost single-handedly turned the sex-and-shopping genre of fiction into the stuff of high commerce, making her one of the world’s best-selling novelists if not one of the most critically acclaimed, died on Saturday at her home in the Bel Air section of Los Angeles. She was 91.

Her publicist, John Tellem, confirmed the death.

Though she did not publish her first book until she was 50, Ms. Krantz reigned for decades afterward as the international queen of poolside reading. Her 10 novels — beginning with “Scruples” in 1978 and ending with “The Jewels of Tessa Kent” in 1998 — have together sold more than 85 million copies in more than 50 languages.

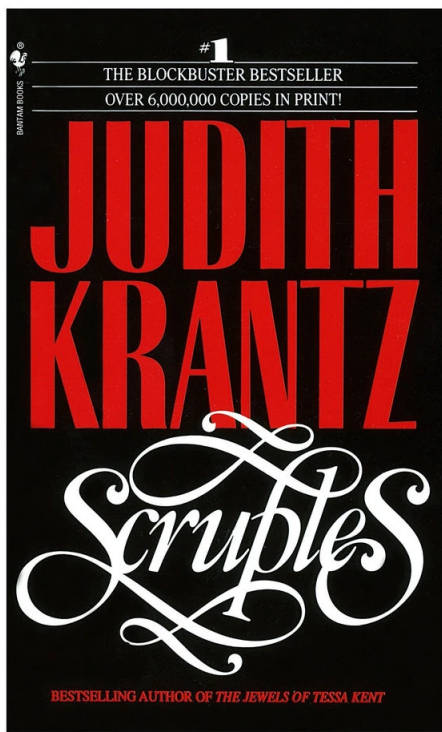
Most became television movies or mini-series, many of which were produced by Ms. Krantz’s husband, Steve Krantz.

What drove Ms. Krantz’s books to the tops of best seller lists time and again was a formula that she honed to glittering perfection: fevered horizontal activities combined with fevered vertical ones — the former taking place in sumptuously appointed bedrooms and five-star hotels, the latter anywhere with a cash register and astronomical price tags.

A hallmark of the formula was that it embraced sex and shopping in almost equal measure, with each recounted in modifier-laden detail.

“Recklessly she flung herself out of her clouds of chiffon plumage only to appear in her resplendent flesh, lying totally naked on a pile of horse blankets, laughing softly as she watched Stash Valensky, momentarily bewildered and taken by surprise, struggle out of his dinner jacket,” Ms. Krantz writes in her second novel, “Princess Daisy” (1980). “Soon, very soon, he was as naked as she. He savaged her abandoned flesh with an urgency, almost a cannibalism, he hadn’t known in years.”

Elements of Ms. Krantz’s formula had existed piecemeal in earlier fiction for women, conspicuously in the work of Jacqueline Susann, the author of “Valley of the Dolls” (1966) and other steamy novels of the 1960s and ’70s. But Ms. Krantz was almost certainly the first writer to combine the steam and the shopping in such opulent profusion — and to do so all the way to the bank.



Ms. Krantz's first novel, "Scruples," reached No.1 on The New York Times Best Seller List in the summer of 1978.

In a sense, Ms. Krantz was a fantasy novelist. Her heroines — invariably rich, thin, savvy, ambitious and preternaturally beautiful — are undisputed princesses, their castles the opulent hotels, condominiums, casinos and boutiques of New York, Paris, Beverly Hills and Monte Carlo.

Her narratives are rife with sacred objects: a hurtling catalog of brand names that offers readers a Cook's tour of high-end material culture.

A passage from "Scruples" reads: "They went to other collections, chez Saint Laurent and Lanvin and Nina Ricci and Balmain and Givenchy and Chanel, the seats less good, sometimes quite bad, for impecunious countesses are not treated with much respect in the great couture houses."

"I've never written about real people," Ms. Krantz told Town & Country magazine in 1998, adding: "In a way, I write Horatio Alger stories for women."

Ms. Krantz's novels embody a sexual politics at once feminist and retrograde. Her heroines are career women striding through glamorous realms of fashion, publishing, art and retailing. They are sexually assertive, as apt to tear off a man's bespoke silk shirt as they are to have their own bodices ripped.

Yet in book after book, the heroine's overriding goal is to find true love with a hero who is superlatively handsome, staggeringly virile and stupendously rich.

Not surprising, Ms. Krantz's novels took regular drubbings from reviewers. The English novelist and critic Angela Carter once likened reading them to "being sealed inside a luxury shopping mall whilst being softly pelted with scented sex technique manuals."



Ms. Krantz shopping at Saks Fifth Avenue in Manhattan in 2000. For decades, she reigned as the queen of poolside reading.

Ruby Washington/The New York Times

To such criticisms, Ms. Krantz brought a generous dose of self-awareness.

“I write the best books that I know how; I can’t write any better than this,” she told The Los Angeles Times in 1990. “People think that because I had a good education, I’m not writing on the level that I should. They think I’m harboring some slim little intellectual volume, that I am really Isaac Bashevis Singer in disguise.”

In the end, Ms. Krantz appeared to have the last laugh. Of all the luxury brands that loom large in her books, there is none larger or more luxurious than the Judith Krantz brand itself — a brand, impeccably built, that allowed her to lead the jet-setting, Chanel-clad life of a character in a Judith Krantz novel.

Judith Bluma-Gittel Tarcher was born in Manhattan on Jan. 9, 1928; her middle name means “lovely flower” in Yiddish. Her father, Jack, ran his own advertising agency and was later a vice president of the Madison Avenue powerhouse Doyle Dane Bernbach. Her mother, Mary (Brager) Tarcher, was a lawyer who became an executive of the Legal Aid Society. Her younger brother, Jeremy, grew up to found the publishing house J. P. Tarcher, which specializes in New Age and self-help books. (She also had a sister, Mimi.)

Young Judy was reared in a Central Park West apartment awash in Renoir, Degas and Soutine and attended the private Birch Wathen School (now the Birch Wathen Lenox School) on the Upper East Side. But her mother, wanting her not to take wealth for granted, dressed her in unfashionable

clothes, a condition, Ms. Krantz later said, that made her deeply unpopular at school.

“I didn’t have romantic fantasies; I had clothes fantasies,” she told Redbook magazine in 2000. “I thought that if I had absolutely perfect clothes, everyone would like me.”

After earning a bachelor’s degree in English from Wellesley in Massachusetts, Ms. Krantz worked as a fashion publicist in Paris before returning to New York. She married Mr. Krantz in 1954. He would go on to produce “Fritz the Cat” (1972), the first X-rated full-length animated film, and the romantic comedy “Cooley High” (1975).

Ms. Krantz became an accessories editor at Good Housekeeping and later wrote for women’s magazines, including Cosmopolitan.

Ms. Krantz’s 1986 novel was one of many adapted for a television mini-series.

For one article for Cosmo, she was assigned to compile readers’ sex fantasies. In doing so she added a few of her own, only to be told by the magazine’s editor, Helen Gurley Brown, that her fantasies were far too racy for Cosmo to print. Years later, Ms. Krantz cheerfully repurposed them for one of her novels.

At her husband’s urging, Ms. Krantz turned her vivid imagination to fiction in the late 1970s. With the aid of a vigorous publicity campaign by a press agent she had hired, “Scruples,” issued by Crown Publishers, reached No. 1 on The New York Times Best Seller List in the summer of 1978.

By the end of 1979, the novel had sold more than 220,000 copies in hardcover and more than 3 million in paperback. That year, in a highly publicized transaction, Bantam Books bought the paperback rights to “Princess Daisy” for \$3.2 million, then a record for a softcover sale.

Ms. Krantz, who moved to Southern California with her family in the early 1970s, lived for many years in an 8,000-square-foot Bel Air home that was a riot of chintz, the silver snuff boxes and 19th-century opaline glass she collected, Chanel suits — she owned at least 40 — and Hermès . (“In a changing world, for a woman who loves handbags, Hermès is a rock in a raging storm,” Ms. Krantz wrote in “Sex and Shopping: The Confessions of a Nice Jewish Girl,” her cannily titled memoir of 2000.)

Ms. Krantz is survived by her sons, Tony and Nicholas, and two grandchildren. Mr. Krantz died in 2007. Her brother, Jeremy Tarcher, died in 2015.

Her other novels include “Mistral’s Daughter” (1982), “I’ll Take Manhattan” (1986), “Dazzle” (1990) and “Scruples Two” (1992).

If it nettled Ms. Krantz that her work was compared unfavorably with that of literary novelists, she could take heart from the fact that her books found their way to millions of readers who appreciated them for precisely what they were — a point brought home vividly after tiny errors surfaced in two of her novels.

In “Scruples,” Ms. Krantz’s heroine wears a pair of 11-carat diamond earrings. Later in the book, the earrings were inadvertently described as nine carats each, a discrepancy about which more than 450 readers wrote her disgruntled letters.

On the other hand, when “Princess Daisy” erroneously placed the start of World War II at 1940 instead of 1939, Ms. Krantz received only a single letter.

Correction: June 24, 2019

Because of an editing error, an earlier version of this obituary misstated Ms. Krantz’s mother’s surname through marriage. It was Tarcher, not Gittel.

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