

Stone reels 'em in at BookExpo

Novel approach to autobiography

By Bob Minzesheimer

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CHICAGO — Oliver Stone, the dissident moviemaker-turned-novelist, says he "magnetizes attention."

With 300 authors from Charlton Heston (*Charlton Heston Presents the Bible*) to Kitty Kelley (*The Royals*) promoting their forthcoming books at BookExpo America, the 50th annual convention of the American Booksellers Association, Stone attracted one of the largest crowds Sunday.

They heard him discuss what he called Martin Luther King Jr.'s "sanctimonious" image and Stone's autobiographical novel, which is more novel than autobiography.

A *Child's Night Dream*, out in September from St. Martin's Press, should be treated, like his movies, Stone said, as a "dramatization."

And that's what his critics, who accuse Stone of rewriting history, don't understand, he complained. "Like we said in the front of Nixon and at the end of JFK, 'This is a dramatization.'"

In print, Stone dramatizes his early life, with all the angst of a 19-year-old Yale dropout destined for Vietnam. Whole chunks of it were written when he was 19. He threw portions of the manuscript into New York's East River, when he was "totally self-absorbed, on the edge of pathology."

But don't expect "Hollywood celebrity revelations," Stone said. "It's writing that's dark and dangerous ... I don't expect it to be a best seller, but you never know these days."

His next controversy will be a movie he said he's developing ("that means it may not be made") on Martin Luther King Jr., with the help of King's son Dexter.

The slain civil rights leader was a hero, but not a god, Stone said, and has become "too much the pompous sanctimonious symbol." He "needs to be brought down

and made to walk the earth."

Of the other authors here, only one showed up in a sequined tank top and striped short shorts: the irrepressible exercise philosopher Richard Simmons.

Simmons, author of a new low-fat cookbook, *Sweetie Pie*, mugged for photos with booksellers, urging them to get that "Norman Rockwell feeling."

When romance writer Susan Paul gave Simmons a copy of her newest book, *Surrena's Choice*, Simmons warned of the danger of romances: "You eat while you read them."

Pulitzer Prize winner Frank McCourt was here to accept yet another award for *Angela's Ashes*, his memoir of the misery of growing up poor in Ireland.

McCourt told of a friend who wanted to write his memoir but grew up happy and comfortable in Scarsdale, a wealthy New York suburb. McCourt advised him, "Call it, *A Happy Childhood: The Search for Misery*."

McCourt's sequel, due out in 1999, will be called 'Tis, the final word in *Angela's Ashes*.

With many of the biggest New York publishers absent, much of the convention talk was about flat sales, high rates of returns, the perilous state of independent bookstores and the commercialization of publishing under new corporate owners.

"For decades, publishers were happy to make a 4% profit, after taxes," said Andre Schiffrin, director of New Press, a 5-year-old nonprofit publishing firm. "Now they're expected to make 12% to 20%, and that has changed the nature of what they're publishing."

Former Congresswoman Pat Schroeder, who took over Sunday as the president of the Association of American Publishers, said one of her goals is to "decouple" the adjective "beleaguered" from the noun "publishing industry."