

[an error occurred while processing this directive]



Alex Witchel, culture and style reporter with the New York Times, adapted her book from a series of articles.

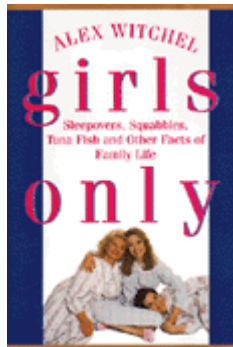
Nov. 24, 1999

Adventures With Mom

N.Y. Times writer discusses her new book, "Girls Only"

You're out to lunch with your mother and William Shatner. She's had a crush on Captain Kirk for 30 years -- to the point where she allows Shatner to kiss her. Shatner plays into the fantasy by seeming trapped in a peculiar limbo between Kirk and his actual personality.

What's a girl to do?



If you're [New York Times](#) culture and style reporter Alex Witchel, it's all in a day's work. She encountered this scenario first-hand while writing a series of articles for the Times about hanging out with her mother and/or her younger sister, Phoebe. Witchel's recent book,

["Girls Only."](#) is an adaptation of that series.

"I felt that my mother had lost her senses," Witchel said Monday, in an appearance before associate professor David Abrahamson's "Literary Journalism" class. As for Shatner, "I don't think he knew if he was William Shatner or Captain Kirk anymore."

Although other family members balked at being included in her articles, Witchel's mother "appreciated that I was telling the story," she said. Witchel said she initially had trouble writing about her mother as anything other than her mother. "It was hard for me, at first, to think of my mother as a person, a woman, a girl, a female," she said.

Among their other adventures together was a sleep-over at the house where the Lizzie Borden murder

took place. While the series had had a successful run until that point, Witchel "began to feel like there was a limit to this," she said. "There are so many situations you can be in with your mom where it's like, 'Enough, already.' "

Aside from her adventures with mom, Witchel's work at the Times has included authoring about 200 profiles of famous personalities. While such profiles often devolve into puff pieces in less experienced, determined hands, Witchel said she won't let herself be used as a promotional tool.



Students and faculty listen to Witchel read a passage from "Girls Only."

"People try to use the Times, as they try to use most newspapers and magazines," she told the students and faculty. When she fact-checks her articles, people will sometimes ask her to fax them the complete article.

"I'm like, 'I don't think we'll write it together,' " Witchel said.

Her occasional negative pieces -- she estimated probably only 10 or 12 fall firmly into that category, "but that's what people remember" -- have earned Witchel "a reputation of being tough," she said.



"People try to use the Times, as they try to use most newspapers and magazines," said Witchel, who visited associate professor David Abrahamson's "Literary Journalism" class.

writes, and "if all five pairs of eyes read it and think it's fair, it's usually OK."

"Some people will go to any lengths not to have me write the piece," Witchel said. "I try not to do it [be negative] unless it's really genuine." Five editors and a lawyer read everything she

One pet peeve that often produces an unfriendly article is when interview subject don't let their true selves show through.

"I usually have a bad response to people who are dishonest to me, and I usually have the bad response while they're being dishonest," Witchel said. The piece she wrote about Shatner/Kirk, a portion of which she read to students and faculty, fell into that category.

"He didn't say one real thing," she said. "That, to me, is dishonest. Part of the price is, they have to show a little bit about themselves."

[an error occurred while processing this directive]