

BOOK WORLD

Dames at Sea, Adrift

STILL SUMMER

By Jacquelyn Mitchard
Warner, 307 pp. \$24.99

By CAROLINE PRESTON,
whose most recent novel is "Gatsby's Girl"

Why do sea tales usually have an all-male cast? Think "Kon-Tiki" or "Robinson Crusoe" or "The Old Man and the Sea." Maybe women are too sensible to cast off in a flimsy vessel with only a leaky barrel of fresh water and a sketchy map. In her new novel, "Still Summer," Mitchard imagines how four landlubber women would cope if they found themselves lost at sea. Not surprisingly, they deal with thirst, pirates and interpersonal relationships far differently than Thor or Robinson.

Starting with "The Deep End of the Ocean," the first pick of Oprah's now legendary book club, Mitchard's six previous novels explore a common theme: how ordinary women react in extraordinary circumstances. Mitchard's power as a writer lies in her ability to set tragic events — the diagnosis of a serious illness, the disappearance of a child — within the mundane domestic details of her characters' lives.

"Still Summer" opens with the same benign premise as "Deep End of the Ocean": a reunion of three high school friends who called themselves the Godmothers. Twenty-five years after graduation, Tracy and Holly have long ago traded in their fishnet stockings and imitation black leather jackets for soccer-playing kids, minivans and unglamorous careers (gym teacher and nurse). Only the Godmothers' ringleader, the beautiful Olivia, managed to leave Westbrook, Ill., via marriage to an Italian count.

The setting for the reunion is a Caribbean cruise aboard a chartered yacht, organized by Tracy, the mother hen, to cheer up the recently widowed Olivia. At the last minute, Tracy's surly but beautiful teenage daughter, Cammie, tags along, having been dumped by a boyfriend and in need of some cheering up herself. The Opus, a "gleaming and magnificent" 53-foot trimaran, does not disappoint the four women. Neither does the crew.

Captain Lenny and first mate Michel have all the qualifications required in the charter-boat industry. They can lead scuba dives, tell pirate stories, "poach monkfish in lemongrass and wine," blend potent drinks and take off their shirts "when hauling on the halyards to



make it look like hard work and give the old gals a bit of an eye-ful."

Lenny begins the cruise with one of those overly detailed safety lectures that signify impending disaster — the flares, the GPS, the inflatable raft, the emergency food rations, the water maker. Oh, and the gun locked in a strongbox. The women, already thinking about monkfish and snowy drinks, pay about as much attention as airline passengers when told how to turn a seat cushion into a life preserver.

For the first three days, the sailboat blissfully bobs through paradise as advertised, but trouble is brewing just over the horizon as a storm picks up speed. More ominously, three men in a stolen boat with a hold full of heroin are heading on a collision course toward the Opus over ever-more-choppy seas. A couple of minor mishaps separate Michel and Lenny from the Opus despite their "instinctive sea skill." After a hundred pages of storm-building and clue-sprinkling, Mitchard seems impatient to get down to business: four women alone on the deep blue sea.

With the crew overboard, Tracy, Holly and Cammie attempt to man the helm to the best of their abilities, which are not vast — a little sailing on a Wisconsin lake, a high school auto mechanics class. Everything that can go wrong does. The sail blows out, the power fails, the food spoils, a leg wound starts to fester . . . then the pirates clamber aboard.

The drug smugglers guzzle the last of their water and make lewd grumblings in Spanish toward the bikini-clad Cammie. The Godmothers get the gist without a translation. Big mistake, Ernesto and Carlo.

"Still Summer" succeeds best when Mitchard plays to her strength: the

ability to capture the noble and slightly ridiculous dimensions of her middle-aged characters. Unlike Olivia, who has kept her figure, "by dint of a suck," Holly and Tracy go for frumpy resort wear but there's sinew beneath those plaid Bermuda shorts.

Unfortunately, "Still Summer" is undermined by predictable plot turns and tired character types. As the days tick by, Olivia lapses into Alexis Carrington hauteur, more concerned that the sunburn and dehydration will damage her skin than that they might kill her. The non-English-speaking thugs, with their "smell of offal and pitted teeth," seem to have drifted in from a 1960s John D. MacDonald novel. The final revelation has been so laboriously foreshadowed that the only surprise is that the women hadn't figured it out years before.

But Mitchard shouldn't be judged too harshly; her aim is to create a high-seas yarn with a suburban-mom twist. While the relentless nautical calamities are far-fetched, the women's willingness to throw themselves overboard, literally, to save a precious daughter is not. As the title implies, "Still Summer" provides an entertaining hammock read, but Mitchard's fans may hope she returns to true form in her next novel.

After Mistrial, Expect Rerun Of Bizarre Spector Spectacle

SPECTOR, From C1

follows acquittals of other celebrity defendants, such as Robert Blake, Michael Jackson and O.J. Simpson, and raises again the question of celebrity justice in California. During the trial, prosecutors presented testimony to show Spector has a long history of pulling guns on women, was drinking in his castle with Clarkson and, after his chauffeur heard a loud pop, came to the back door with a gun in his hand and said, "I think I killed somebody."

But one of the jurors who voted to convict said afterward that the two holdouts sided with the defense theory that Clarkson might have committed suicide. To sway them, the juror said, the prosecutors should have produced a "psychological profile" of Clarkson on "whether she was suicidal or not."

Another juror who voted guilty suggested the panel was very interested in the "CSI"-style dissection of blood spray and splatters. At one point in their deliberations, the jurors reenacted where blood would fly with a gun in Clarkson's mouth. "Some people thought there was not enough blood. The jurors expected to see more blood" on Spector and his clothes, he said. "They couldn't put the gun in his hand," he said of the prosecution, though the juror said the totality of the evidence and common sense made him willing to convict. Both jurors declined to be identified.

The Spector trial, as celebrity justice proceedings go, was kind of a ratings flop. Though the Los Angeles Times and the Associated Press doggedly stayed in the game, day after day, many media outlets changed the channel and only dipped in and out of the proceedings.

Spector, credited with inventing the "wall of sound" in pop music, had hits back in the day with the Ronettes and the Righteous Brothers. Paris Hilton, apparently, he is not. But the trial was not without its drama. Here are some highlights:

■ Spector's lead attorney, the mouthy New Yorker Bruce Cutler, best known for three swashbuckling defenses of mob boss John Gotti, quit Spector's case in late August. Cutler was sidelined by the rest of the defense team after the judge scolded him for yelling at a witness. Cutler spent the next three months out of court, working on a television reality show about a mock trial in which he plays a judge.

■ Joan Rivers's former manager testified Spector pulled a gun on her when she tried to leave after a



Juror Larry Paul Fidler presided over an often wacky trial.

night of drinking. (Four other women said the same thing.) Rivers's security guard also took the stand to quote Spector at a Christmas party, saying, "All women deserve a bullet in their heads."

■ Lobbying to get on the stand — and thus in front of Court TV's camera — was Jody "Babydoll" Gibson, a Hollywood madam who did prison time for running a prostitution ring. Gibson showed up in court wearing a micro-mini suit and stiletto heels and said she had Clarkson's name in one of her trick books. But the judge ruled the little black book irrelevant. Not coincidentally, Gibson was aggressively promoting a new book, "Secrets of a Hollywood Super Madam."

■ Also hoping to soak up 15 minutes of fame was an ex-boyfriend of Clarkson, Raul Julia-Levy, who claimed to be the son of actor Raul Julia. Julia's widow said he wasn't. Turns out he uses six aliases and has been arrested for everything from sexual assault to DUI. The judge also turned him away.

■ Juror No. 268, selected for duty despite working for "Dateline NBC" as a producer on high-profile trial segments, was singled out by the judge as jurors left after a day of deliberations, the Los Angeles Times reported. "Dateline NBC" was showing a special on the Spector trial that night; the judge warned No. 268 not to use his experiences later at work. "You're on lifetime jury duty," the judge said. The producer quipped, "I thought I already was."

■ The most famous no-show in front of the jury, though, was certainly criminalist Henry Lee. Spector's defense hired the O.J.-era forensic expert to look over bloodstains on Spector's jacket. But when the time came for Lee to testify before the jurors, he was busy in China — auditioning actors to play

himself in a miniseries about his life, according to Chinese Daily News.

■ Not that Lee especially wanted to take the stand. A former Spector lawyer told the court that the day after Clarkson's death, she saw Lee pick up an object that may have been one of Clarkson's fingernails and spirit it away. Such evidence must be shown to prosecutors. If Lee had testified in front of the jury, prosecutors could have tried to impeach him, potentially ruining the credibility that provides Lee with lucrative speaking gigs and an eponymous show on Court TV.

■ Not least among the colorful characters was Spector, whose wardrobe of trenchcoat-length suit jackets with silk handkerchiefs, his platform boots and frizzy/flat/brown/blond hairstyles, his thousand-yard stare (he told police he was on multiple medications) and his trembling hands made him an eerie distraction in court.

■ The victim, Lana Clarkson, by contrast, came across as a tragic figure even before her death. A cocktail waitress earning \$9 an hour, Clarkson supposedly burst into tears after "Transformers" director Michael Bay didn't recognize her at a party. (Bay testified that incident didn't happen.) Clarkson wrote in one e-mail shortly before her death, "I'll have to bite the bullet and start doing amateur strip contests" for money.

■ Clarkson may have lived for several minutes after she was shot, coughing up blood onto Spector's jacket, according to celebrity criminologist Michael Baden (who happens to be married to Spector's defense attorney Linda Kenney Baden). The theory caught prosecutors off guard — they are entitled to know such revelations are coming. So the judge decided jurors could take defense misconduct into account as they deliberated.

■ Spector's 27-year-old wife, Rachelle, defended her husband on Court TV just before jurors got the case. When the judge reprimanded her, she talked back until he threatened to hold her in contempt.

■ As deliberations dragged on, bored reporters gathered in a press room upstairs to watch DVDs on a television provided by the district attorney's office. They screened an "I Dream of Jeannie" episode guest starring Phil Spector; "Fast Times at Ridgmont High," in which Clarkson has an itty-bitty part; and several films where people die from gunshot wounds to the mouth.

Staff writer Karl Vick contributed to this report.



Phil Spector, second from right, is escorted out of court in September. The music producer's wardrobe, frizzy hairstyles and vacant stare — he told police he was on multiple medications — became distractions in court.

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