

THE CRITICS



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EVERYWOMAN.COM

Getting out of the house with Martha Stewart.

BY JOAN DIDION

According to “The Web Guide to Martha Stewart—The UNOFFICIAL Site!,” which was created by a former graduate student named Kerry Ogata as “a thesis procrastination technique” and then passed on to those who now maintain it, the fifty-eight-year-old chairman and C.E.O. of Martha Stewart Living Omnimedia L.L.C. (“MSO” on the New York Stock Exchange) needs only four hours of sleep a night, utilizes the saved hours by grooming her six cats and gardening by flashlight, prefers Macs in the office and a PowerBook for herself, commutes between her house in Westport and her two houses in East Hampton and her Manhattan apartment in a G.M.C. Suburban (“with chauffeur”) or a Jaguar XJ6 (“she drives herself”), was raised the second-oldest of six children in a Polish-American family in Nutley, New Jersey, has one daughter, Alexis, and survived “a non-amicable divorce” from her husband of twenty-six years, Andrew Stewart (“Andy” on the site), who then “married Martha’s former assistant who is 21 years younger than he is.”

Contributors to the site’s “Opinions” page, like good friends everywhere, have mixed feelings about Andy’s defection, which occurred in 1987, while Martha was on the road promoting “Martha Stewart Weddings,” the preface to which offered a possibly prescient view of her own 1961 wedding. “I was a naïve nineteen-year-old, still a student at Barnard, and Andy was beginning Yale Law School, so it seemed appropriate to be married in St. Paul’s Chapel at Columbia in an Episcopalian service, mainly because we didn’t have anyplace else to go,” she wrote, and included a photograph showing the

wedding dress she and her mother had made of embroidered Swiss organdy bought on West Thirty-eighth Street. On-line, the relative cases of “Martha” and of “Andy” and even of “Alexis,” who originally took her mother’s side in the divorce, get debated with startling familiarity. “BTW, I don’t blame Andy,” one contributor offers. “I think he took all he could. I think it’s too bad that Alexis felt she had to choose.” Another contributor, another view: “I work fifty hours a week and admit sometimes I don’t have time to ‘be all that I can be’ but when Martha started out she was doing this part-time and raising Alexis and making a home for that schmuck Andy (I bet he is sorry he ever left her).”

Although “The UNOFFICIAL Site!” is just that, unofficial, “not affiliated with Martha Stewart, her agents, Martha Stewart Living Omnimedia, LLC or any other Martha Stewart Enterprises,” its fairly lighthearted approach to its subject’s protean competence (“What can’t Martha do? According to Martha herself, ‘Hang-gliding, and I hate shopping for clothes’”) should in no way be construed as disloyalty to Martha’s objectives, which are, as the prospectus prepared for Martha Stewart Living Omnimedia’s initial public offering last October explained, “to provide our original ‘how-to’ content and information to as many consumers as possible” and “to turn our consumers into ‘doers’ by offering them the information and products they need for do-it-yourself ingenuity ‘the Martha Stewart way.’” The creators and users of “The UNOFFICIAL Site!” clearly maintain a special relationship with the subject at hand, as do the cre-

ators and users of other unofficial or self-invented sites crafted in the same spirit: “My Martha Stewart Page,” say, or “Gothic Martha Stewart,” which advises teen-agers living at home on how they can “goth up” their rooms without freaking their parents (“First of all, don’t paint everything black”) by taking their cues from Martha.

“Martha adores finding old linens and gently worn furniture at flea markets,” users of “Gothic Martha Stewart” are reminded. “She sews a lot of her own household dressings. She paints and experiments with unusual painting techniques on objects small and large. She loves flowers, live and dried . . . and even though her surroundings look very rich, many of her ideas are created from rather simple and inexpensive materials, like fabric scraps and secondhand dishes.” For the creator of “My Martha Stewart Page,” even the “extremely anal” quality of Martha’s expressed preoccupation with the appearance of her liquid-detergent dispenser can be a learning experience, a source of concern that becomes a source of illumination: “It makes me worry about her. . . . Of course it is just this strangeness that makes me love her. She helps me know I’m OK—everyone’s OK. . . . She seems perfect, but she’s not. She’s obsessed. She’s frantic. She’s a control freak beyond my wildest dreams. And that shows me two things: A) no one is perfect and B) there’s a price for everything.”

There is an unusual bonding here, a proprietary intimacy that eludes conventional precepts of merchandising to go to the very heart of the enterprise, the brand, what Martha prefers to call the “presence”: the two magazines (*Martha*

ABOVE: ELENA XAUSA



Stewart, the founder of Martha Stewart Living Omnimedia, has, as she put it, “elevated” the job of homemaker.

Stewart Living and *Martha Stewart Weddings*) that between them reach ten million readers, the twenty-seven books that have sold eight and a half million copies, the weekday radio show carried on two hundred and seventy stations, the syndicated “AskMartha” column that appears in two hundred and thirty-three newspapers, the televised show six days a week on CBS, the weekly slot on the CBS morning show, the cable-TV show (“From Martha’s Kitchen,” the Food Network’s top-rated weekly show among women aged twenty-five to fifty-four), the Web site (www.marthastewart.com) with more than one million registered users and six hundred and twenty-seven thousand hits a month, the merchandising tie-ins with Kmart and Sears and Sherwin-Williams (Kmart alone last year sold more than a billion dollars’ worth of Martha Stewart merchandise), the catalogue operation (Martha by Mail) from which some twenty-eight hundred products (Valentine Garlands, Valentine Treat Bags, Ready-to-Decorate Cookies, Sweetheart Cake Rings, Heart Desert Scoops, Heart Rosette Sets, Heart-Shaped Pancake Molds, and Lace-Paper Valentine Kits, to name a few from the on-line “Valentine’s Day” pages) can be ordered either from the catalogues themselves (eleven annual editions, fifteen million copies) or from Web pages with exceptionally inviting layouts and seductively logical links.

These products are not inexpensive. The Lace-Paper Valentine Kit contains enough card stock and paper lace to make “about forty” valentines, which could be viewed as something less than a buy at forty-two dollars plus time and labor. On the “Cakes and Cake Stands” page, the Holiday Cake-Stencil Set, which consists of eight nine-inch plastic stencils for the decorative dusting of cakes with confectioner’s sugar or cocoa, sells for twenty-eight dollars. On the “marthasflowers” pages, twenty-five tea roses, which are available for eighteen dollars a dozen at Roses Only in New York, cost fifty-two dollars, and the larger of the two “suggested vases” to put them in (an example of the site’s linking logic) another seventy-eight dollars. A set of fifty Scalloped Tulle Rounds, eight-and-three-quarter-inch circles of tulle in which to tie up wedding favors, costs eighteen dollars, and the seam binding used to tie them (“sold

separately,” another natural link) costs, in the six-color Seam-Binding Ribbon Collection, fifty-six dollars. Seam binding sells retail for pennies, and, at Paron on West Fifty-seventh Street in New York, not the least expensive source, one-hundred-and-eight-inch-wide tulle sells for four dollars a yard. Since the amount of one-hundred-and-eight-inch tulle required to make fifty Scalloped Tulle Rounds would be slightly over a yard, the on-line buyer can be paying only for the imprimatur of “Martha,” whose genius it was to take the once familiar notion of doing-it-yourself to previously uncharted territory: somewhere east of actually doing it yourself, somewhere west of paying Robert Isabell to do it.

This is a billion-dollar company the only real product of which, in other words, is Martha Stewart herself, an unusual business condition acknowledged in the prospectus prepared for Martha Stewart Living Omnimedia’s strikingly successful October I.P.O. “Our business would be adversely affected if: Martha Stewart’s public image or reputation were to be tarnished,” the “Risk Factors” section of the prospectus read in part. “Martha Stewart, as well as her name, her image, and the trademarks and other intellectual property rights relating to these, are integral to our marketing efforts and form the core of our brand name. Our continued success and the value of our brand name therefore depends, to a large degree, on the reputation of Martha Stewart.”

The perils of totally identifying a brand with a single living and therefore vulnerable human being were much discussed around the time of the I.P.O., and the question of what would happen to Martha Stewart Living Omnimedia if Martha Stewart were to become ill or die (“the diminution or loss of the services of Martha Stewart,” in the words of the prospectus) remained open. “That was always an issue for us,” Don Logan, the president of Time Inc., told the *Los Angeles Times* in 1997, a few months after Stewart managed to raise enough of what she called “internally generated capital,” \$53.3 million, to buy herself out of Time Warner, which had been resisting expansion of a business built entirely around a single personality. “I think we are now spread very nicely over an area where our information can be trusted,” Stewart her-

self maintained, and it did seem clear that the very expansion and repetition of the name that had made Time Warner nervous—every “Martha Stewart” item sold, every “Martha Stewart Everyday” commercial aired—was paradoxically serving to insulate the brand from the possible loss of the personality behind it.

The related question, of what would happen if “Martha Stewart’s public image or reputation were to be tarnished,” seemed less worrisome, since in any practical way the question of whether it was possible to tarnish Martha Stewart’s public image or reputation had already been answered, with the 1997 publication and ascension to the *New York Times* best-seller list of “Just Desserts,” an unauthorized biography of Martha Stewart by Jerry Oppenheimer, whose previous books were unauthorized biographies of Rock Hudson, Barbara Walters, and Ethel Kennedy. “My investigative juices began to flow,” Oppenheimer wrote in the preface to “Just Desserts.” “If her stories were true, I foresaw a book about a perfect woman who had brought perfection to the masses. If her stories were not true, I foresaw a book that would shatter myths.”

Investigative juices flowing, Oppenheimer discovered that Martha was “driven.” Martha, moreover, sometimes “didn’t tell the whole story.” Martha could be “a real screamer” when situations did not go as planned, although the case Oppenheimer makes on this point suggests, at worst, merit on both sides. Martha was said to have “started to shriek,” for example, when a catering partner backed a car over the “picture-perfect” Shaker picnic basket she had just finished packing with her own blueberry pies. Similarly, Martha was said to have been “just totally freaked” when a smokehouse fire interrupted the shooting of a holiday special and she found that the hose she had personally dragged to the smokehouse (“followed by various blasé crew people, faux concerned family members, smirking kitchen assistants, and a macho Brazilian groundskeeper”) was too short to reach the flames. After running back to the house, getting an extension for the hose, and putting out the fire, Martha, many would think understandably, exchanged words with the groundskeeper, “whom she fired on the spot in front of everyone after he talked back to her.”

Other divined faults include idealiz-

ing her early family life (p. 34), embellishing “everything” (p. 42), omitting a key ingredient when a rival preteen caterer asked for her chocolate-cake recipe (p. 43), telling readers of *Martha Stewart Living* that she had as a young girl “sought to discover the key to good literature” even though “a close friend” reported that she had “passionately devoured” the Nancy Drew and Cherry Ames novels (p. 48), misspelling “villainous” in a review of William Makepeace Thackeray’s “Vanity Fair” for the Nutley High School literary magazine (p. 51), having to ask what Kwanzaa was during a 1995 appearance on “Larry King Live” (p. 71), and not only wanting a larger engagement diamond than the one Andy had picked out for her at Harry Winston but obtaining it, at a better price, in the diamond district (p. 101). “That incident should have set off an alarm,” a “lifelong friend” told Oppenheimer. “How many women would do something like that? It was a bad omen.”

This lumping together of insignificant immaturities and economies for conversion into character flaws (a former assistant in the catering business Martha ran in Westport during the nineteen-seventies presents the damning charge “Nothing went to waste. . . . Martha’s philosophy was like someone at a restaurant who had eaten half his steak and tells the waiter ‘Oh, wrap it up, and I’ll take it home’”) continues for four hundred and fourteen pages, at which point Oppenheimer, in full myth-shattering mode, reveals his trump card, “an eerie corporate manifesto” that “somehow slipped out of Martha’s offices and made its way from one Time Inc. executive’s desk to another and eventually from a Xerox machine to the outside world. . . . The white paper, replete with what was described as an incomprehensible flow chart, declared, in part”:

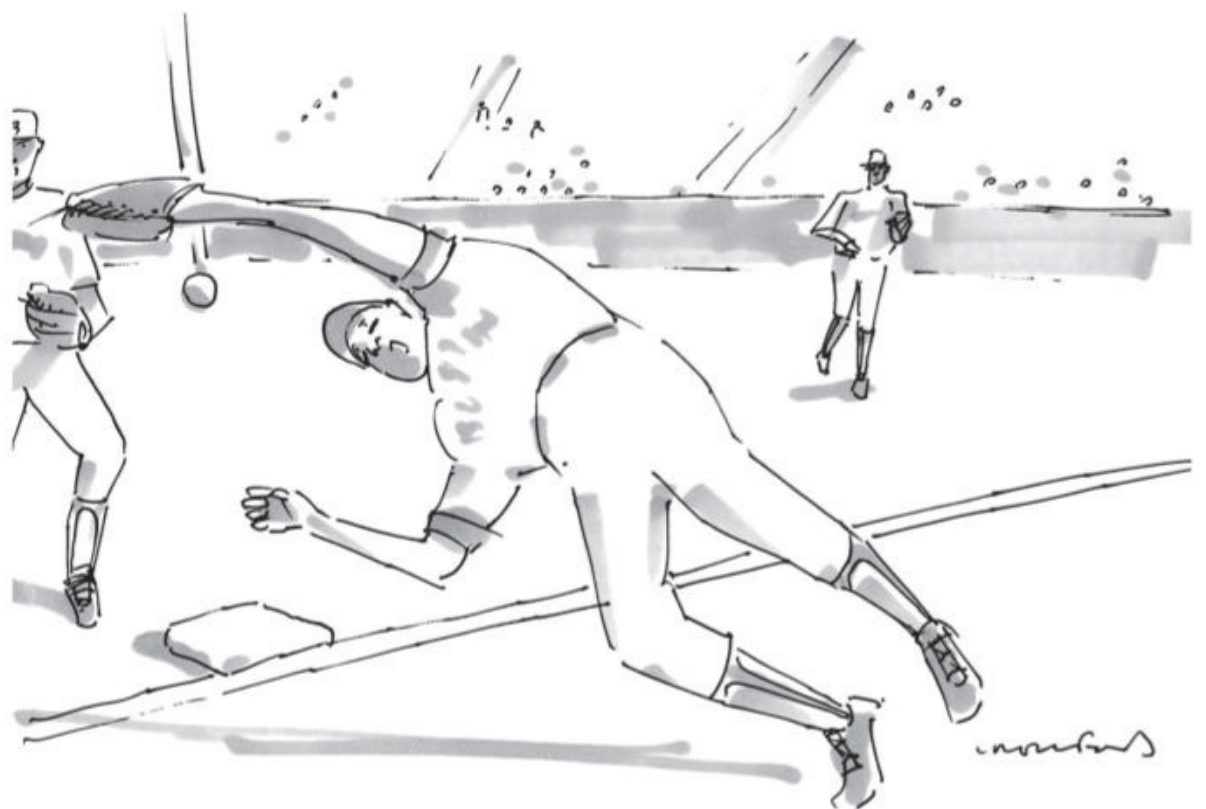
In Martha’s vision, the shared value of the MSL enterprises are highly personal—reflecting her individual goals, beliefs, values and aspirations. . . . “Martha’s Way” can be obtained because she puts us in direct touch with everything we need to know, and tells/shows us exactly what we have to do. . . . MSL enterprises are founded on the proposition that Martha herself is both leader and teacher. . . . While the ranks of “teaching disciples” within MSL may grow and extend, their authority rests upon their direct association with Martha; their work emanates from her approach and philosophies; and their techniques, and products and results meet her test. . . . The magazine, books,

television series, and other distribution sources are only vehicles to enable personal communication with Martha. . . . She is not, and won’t allow herself to be, an institutional image and fiction like Betty Crocker. . . . She is the creative and driving center. . . . By listening to Martha and following her lead, we can achieve real results in our homes too—ourselves—just like she has. . . . It is easy to do. Martha has already “figured it out.” She will personally take us by the hand and show us how to do it.

Oppenheimer construes this purloined memo or mission statement as sinister, of a piece with the Guyana Kool-Aid massacre (“From its wording, some wondered whether Martha’s world was more gentrified Jonestown than happy homemaker”), but in fact it remains an unexceptionable, and quite accurate, assessment of what makes the enterprise go. Martha Stewart Living Omnimedia L.L.C. connects on a level that transcends the absurdly labor-intensive and in many cases prohibitively expensive table settings and decorating touches (the “poinsettia wreath made entirely of ribbon” featured on one December show would require of even a diligent maker, Martha herself allowed, “a couple of hours” and, “if you use the very best ribbon, two or three hundred dollars”) over which its chairman toils six mornings a week on CBS. Nor is the connection about her recipes, which are the recipes of Sunbelt Junior League cookbooks (Grapefruit Mimosas, Apple Cheddar Turnovers, and Southwestern Style S’Mores are a few from the most recent issue of *Martha*

Stewart Entertaining), reflecting American middle-class home cooking as it has existed pretty much through the postwar years. There is in a Martha Stewart recipe none of, say, Elizabeth David’s transforming logic and assurance, none of Julia Child’s mastery of technique.

What there is instead is “Martha,” full focus, establishing “personal communication” with the viewer or reader, showing, telling, leading, teaching, “loving it” when the simplest possible shaken-in-a-jar vinaigrette emulsifies right there on-screen. She presents herself not as an authority but as the friend who has “figured it out,” the enterprising if occasionally manic neighbor who will waste no opportunity to share an educational footnote. “True,” or “Ceylon,” cinnamon, the reader of *Martha Stewart Living* will learn, “originally came from the island now called Sri Lanka,” and “by the time of the Roman Empire . . . was valued at fifteen times its weight in silver.” In a television segment about how to serve champagne, Martha will advise her viewers that the largest champagne bottle, the Balthazar, was named after the king of Babylon, “555 to 539 B.C.” While explaining how to decorate the house for the holidays around the theme “The Twelve Days of Christmas,” Martha will slip in this doubtful but nonetheless useful gloss, a way for the decorator to perceive herself as doing something more significant than painting pressed-paper eggs with two or three coats of white semi-gloss



“Damn those dugout Martinis!”



"I thought we agreed—no moms!"

acrylic paint, followed by another two or three coats of yellow-tinted acrylic varnish, and finishing the result with ribbon and beads: "With the egg so clearly associated with new life, it is not surprising that the six geese a-laying represented the six days of Creation in the carol."

The message Martha is actually sending, the reason large numbers of American women count watching her a comforting and obscurely inspirational experience, seems not very well understood. There has been a flurry of academic work done on the cultural meaning of her success (in the summer of 1998, the *New York Times* reported that "about two dozen scholars across the United States and Canada" were producing such studies as "A Look at Linen Closets: Liminality, Structure and Anti-Structure in Martha Stewart Living" and locating "the fear of transgression" in the magazine's "recurrent images of fences, hedges and garden walls"), but there remains, both in the bond she makes and in the outrage she provokes, something unaddressed, something pitched, like a dog whistle, too high for traditional textual analysis. The outrage, which reaches sometimes startling levels, centers on the misconception that she has somehow tricked her admirers into not noticing the ambition that brought her to their attention. To her critics, she seems to represent a fraud to be exposed, a wrong to be righted. "She's a shark," one declares in *Salon*. "However much she's got,

Martha wants more. And she wants it her way and in her world, not in the balls-out boys' club realms of real estate or technology, but in the delicate land of doily hearts and wedding cakes."

"I can't believe people don't see the irony in the fact that this 'ultimate homemaker' has made a multi-million dollar empire out of baking cookies and selling bed sheets," a posting reads in *Salon's* "ongoing discussion" of Martha. "I read an interview in *Wired* where she said she gets home at 11pm most days, which means she's obviously too busy to be the perfect mom/wife/homemaker—a role which many women feel like they have to live up to because of the image MS projects." Another reader cuts to the chase: "Wasn't there some buzz a while back about Martha stealing her daughter's BF?" The answer: "I thought that was Erica Kane. You know, when she stole Kendra's BF. I think you're getting them confused. Actually, why would any man want to date MS? She is so frigid looking that my television actually gets cold when she's on." "The trouble is that Stewart is about as genuine as Hollywood," a writer in *The Scotsman* charges. "Hers may seem to be a nostalgic siren call for a return to Fifties-style homemaking with an updated elegance, but is she in fact sending out a fraudulent message—putting pressure on American women to achieve impossible perfection in yet another sphere, one in which, unlike ordinary women, Stewart herself has legions of helpers?"

This entire notion of "the perfect mom/wife/homemaker," of the "nostalgic siren call for a return to Fifties-style homemaking," is a considerable misunderstanding of what Martha Stewart actually transmits, the promise she makes her readers and viewers, which is that know-how in the house will translate to can-do outside it. What she offers, and what more strictly professional shelter and food magazines and shows do not, is the promise of transferred manna, transferred luck. She projects a level of taste that transforms the often pointlessly ornamented details of what she is actually doing. The possibility of moving out of the perfected house and into the headier ether of executive action, of doing as Martha does, is clearly presented: "Now I, as a single human being, have six personal fax numbers, fourteen personal phone numbers, seven car-phone numbers, and two cell-phone numbers," as she told readers of *Martha Stewart Living*. On October 19th, the evening of her triumphant I.P.O., she explained, on "The Charlie Rose Show," the genesis of the enterprise. "I was serving a desire—not only mine, but every homemaker's desire, to elevate that job of homemaker," she said. "It was floundering, I think. And we all wanted to escape it, to get out of the house, get that high-paying job and pay somebody else to do everything that we didn't think was really worthy of our attention. And all of a sudden I realized: it was terribly worthy of our attention."

Think about this. Here was a woman who had elevated "that job of homemaker" to a level where even her G.M.C. Suburban came equipped with a Sony MZ-B3 Minidisc Recorder for dictation and a Sony ICD-50 Recorder for short messages and a Watchman FDL-PT22 TV set, plus phones, plus PowerBook. Here was a woman whose idea of how to dress for "that job of homemaker" involved Jil Sander. "Jil's responded to the needs of people like me," she is quoted as having said on "The UNOFFICIAL Site!" "I'm busy; I travel a lot; I want to look great in a picture." Here was a woman who had that very October morning been driven down to the big board to dispense brioches and fresh-squeezed orange juice from a striped tent while Morgan Stanley Dean Witter and Merrill Lynch and Bear, Stearns and Don-

aldson, Lufkin & Jenrette and Banc of America Securities increased the value of her personal stock in the company she personally invented to \$614 million. This does not play into any “nostalgic siren call” for a return to the kind of “homemaking” that seized America during those postwar years when the conversion of industry to peacetime production mandated the creation of a market for Kelvinators, yet Martha was the first to share the moment with her readers.

“The mood was festive, the business community receptive, and the stock began trading with the new symbol MSO,” she confided in her “Letter from Martha” in the December *Martha Stewart Living*, and there between the lines was the promise from the mission statement: *It is easy to do. Martha has already “figured it out.” She will personally take us by the hand and show us how to do it.* What she will show us how to do, it turns out, is a little more invigorating than your average poinsettia-wreath project: “The process was extremely interesting, from deciding exactly what the company was (an ‘integrated multimedia company’ with promising internet capabilities) to creating a complicated and lengthy prospectus that was vetted and revetted (only to be vetted again by the Securities and Exchange Commission) to selling the company with a road show that took us to more than twenty cities in fourteen days (as far off as Europe).” This is getting out of the house with a vengeance, and on your own terms, the secret dream of any woman who has ever made a success of a PTA cake sale. “You could bottle that chili sauce,” neighbors say to home cooks all over America. “You could make a fortune on those date bars.” You could bottle it, you could sell it, you can survive when all else fails: I myself believed for most of my adult life that I could support myself and my family, in the catastrophic absence of all other income sources, by catering.

The “cultural meaning” of Martha Stewart’s success, in other words, lies deep in the success itself, which is why even her troubles and strivings are part of the message, not detrimental but integral to the brand. She has branded herself not as Superwoman but as Everywoman, a distinction that seems to remain unclear to her critics. Martha herself gets it, and talks about herself in print as if

catching up her oldest friend. “I sacrificed family, husband,” she said in a 1996 *Fortune* conversation with Charlotte Beers, the former C.E.O. of Ogilvy & Mather and a member of Martha Stewart Living Omnimedia’s board of directors, and Darla Moore, the president of Richard Rainwater’s investment firm and the inventor of “debtor in possession” financing for companies in bankruptcy. The tone of this conversation was odd, considerably more confessional than the average dialogue among senior executives who know they are being taped by *Fortune*. “Not my choice,” Martha confided about her divorce. “His choice. Now, I’m so happy that it happened. It took a long time for me to realize that it freed me to do more things. I don’t think I would have accomplished what I have if I had stayed married. No way. And it allowed me to make friends that I know I never would have had.”

Martha’s readers understand her divorce, both its pain and its upside. They saw her through it, just as they saw her through her dealings with the S.E.C., her twenty-city road show, her triumph on Wall Street. This relationship between Martha and her readers is a good deal more complicated than the many parodies of and jokes about it would allow. “While fans don’t grow on fruit trees (well, some do), they can be found all over America: in malls, and Kmart, in tract houses and trailer parks, in raised ranches, Tudor condos and Winnebagos,” the parody Martha is made to say in HarperCollins’ “Martha Stuart’s Better Than You at Entertaining.” “Wherever there are women dissatisfied with how they live, with who they are and who they are not, that is where you’ll find potential fans of mine.” These parodies are themselves interesting: too broad, misogynistic in a cartoon way (stripping Martha to her underwear has been a reliable motif of countless on-line parodies), curiously nervous (“Keeping Razors Circumcision-Sharp” is one feature in “Martha Stuart’s Better Than You at Entertaining”), oddly uncomfortable, a little too intent on marginalizing a rather considerable number of women by making light of their situations and their aspirations.

Something here is perceived as threatening, and a glance at “The UNOFFICIAL

Site!,” the subliminal focus of which is somewhere other than on homemaking skills, suggests what it is. What makes Martha “a good role model in many ways,” one contributor writes, is that “she’s a strong woman who’s in charge, and she has indeed changed the way our country, if not the world, views what used to be called ‘women’s work.’” From an eleven-year-old: “Being successful is important in life. . . . It is fun to say ‘When I become Martha Stewart I’m going to have all the things Martha has.’” Even a contributor who admits to an “essentially anti-Martha persona” admires her “intelligence” and “drive,” the way in which this “supreme chef, baker, gardener, decorator, artist, and entrepreneur” showed what it took “to get where she is, where most men aren’t and can’t. . . . She owns her own corporation in her own name, her own magazine, her own show.”

A keen interest in and admiration for business acumen pervades the site. “I know people are threatened by Martha and Time Warner Inc. is going to blow a very ‘good thing’ if they let Martha and her empire walk in the near future,” a contributor to “The UNOFFICIAL Site!” wrote at the time Stewart was trying to buy herself out of Time Warner. “I support Martha in everything she does and I would bet if a man wanted to attach his name to all he did . . . this wouldn’t be a question.” Their own words tell the story these readers and viewers take from Martha: Martha is *in charge*, Martha is *where most men aren’t and can’t*, Martha has *her own magazine*, Martha has *her own show*, Martha not only has *her own corporation* but has it *in her own name*.

This is not a story about a woman who made the best of traditional skills. This is a story about a woman who did her own I.P.O. This is the “woman’s pluck” story, the dust-bowl story, the burying-your-child-on-the-trail story, the I-will-never-go-hungry-again story, the Mildred Pierce story, the story about how the sheer nerve of even professionally unskilled women can prevail, show the men; the story that has historically encouraged women in this country, even as it has threatened men. The dreams and the fears into which Martha Stewart taps are not of “feminine” domesticity but of female power, of the woman who sits down at the table with the men and, still in her apron, walks away with the chips. ♦