

An Audrey for the ages

Self-help never looked so good as in a Hepburn blend of philosophy, biography and, of course, iconic style

By Richard Knight Jr.
Special to the Tribune

"I never think of myself as an icon. What is in other people's minds is not in my mind. I just do my thing."

That's Audrey Hepburn in a new book from Chicago author Melissa Hellstern, "How to Be Lovely: The Audrey Hepburn Way of Life" (Dutton, \$17.95). The book delivers a twist on the typical movie star tell-all by blending biography and philosophy, most of it in the fashion and film legend's own words.

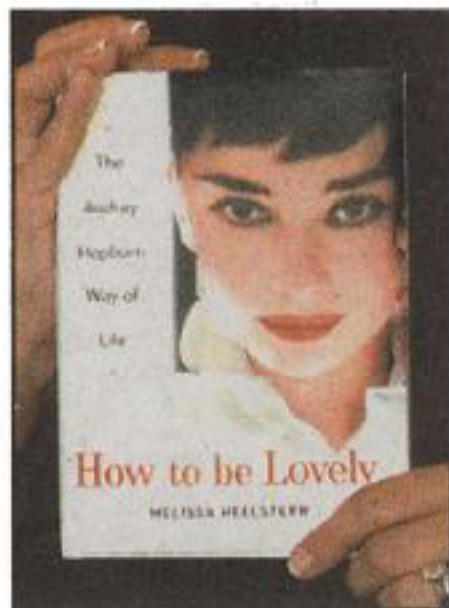
In 10 breezy chapters (with titles like "Happiness" and "Fulfillment") liberally punctuated by photos of That Face, Hepburn, who died in 1993, speaks as Hellstern fills in biographical details and historical context (plus a bit of backstage juice). The book shows that by just "doing her thing," Hepburn was, and is, the premier example of simple elegance and grace for women of all ages.

"I wanted to find a way to let Audrey speak in her own words; let her tell her own story," Hellstern, 32, said in an interview. "Audrey was asked several times to pen an autobiography and never wanted to do it, but I thought perhaps we could find out more about her."

Hellstern wasn't daunted by the plethora of Hepburn books. (Amazon lists more than 25 biographies alone.) "I think there was a gap in the marketplace for Audrey," she said. "I tried to distinctly help her find her own voice and do something different that hadn't been done before. I wanted to distill her own philosophy of life."

To do that, Hellstern spent five years reading other biographies, interviews with the reclusive star and articles that tried to analyze her uniqueness. She collected Hepburn's takes on everything from food to child-rearing to men. "She's remembered as a fashion icon and a great actress but really, her character was the thing that will stand the test of time," Hellstern said.

During her research, Hellstern said, certain Hepburn characteristics kept cropping up.



"Kindness, laughter, a really strong work ethic and of course selflessness, shown to the world with her commitment to UNICEF, all contribute to her being a wonderful role model," Hellstern said. "I hope this book helps women to be more connected to themselves and their community and the world at large—like Audrey was."

Since its release in May (which would have been Hepburn's 75th birthday), the book has had steady sales, and Hellstern is discerning a surprising audience at her signings: teenage girls. "There's a large group

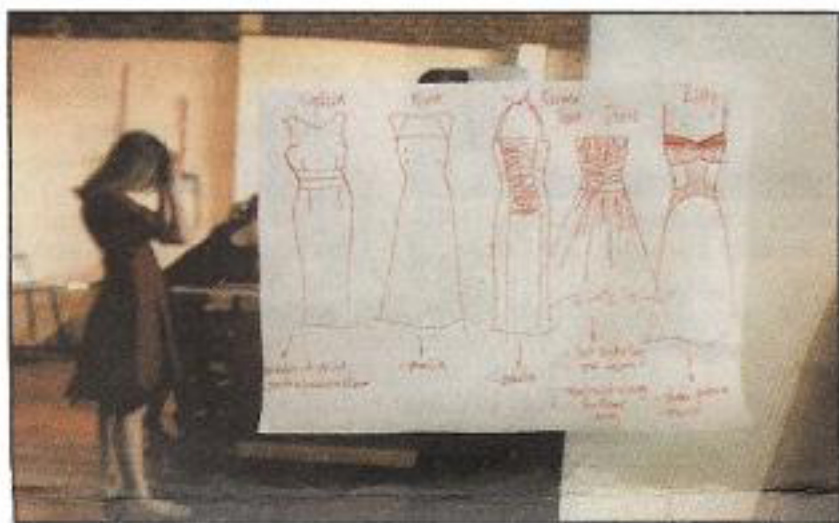
of young women out there who need someone like Audrey Hepburn to admire," she said. "Certain pop stars and others in the media don't offer that. It's so shallow what they do that I think almost in a reactionary way people are looking to the past to find their way."

Hepburn's transformation from a childhood spent under Nazi occupation in Holland to her almost-overnight arrival on the world stage as actress-princess-international sensation in William Wyler's film "Roman Holiday" is certainly the stuff of fairy tales—as is Hellstern's quick ascent into the world of publishing. "How to Be Lovely" is her first book, from her first book proposal.

After meeting celebrity profiler/biographer Bill Zehme seven years ago, Hellstern discovered they were Wicker Park neighbors and they built a rapport. "He's my wisest cheerleader," Hellstern said. Once she had a proposal and sample chapters ready, Zehme steered her toward an agent. That was in February 2003. By April she had a deal with Dutton Books.

Once "How to Be Lovely" was a done deal (the title comes from a song in "Funny Face," the musical Hepburn made with Fred Astaire)—the fairy tale gave way to reality and Hellstern, who also has a freelance corporate-media writing career, juggled her business while immersed in Audreyland.

"But who doesn't want to be lovely?" she said. "Who better to spend five years of your life with, right?"



Tribune photos by Heather Stone
Melissa Hellstern (above), author of "How to Be Lovely: The Audrey Hepburn Way of Life," tries on an Audrey-style dress for size at Dame Couture in Chicago. The co-owners of Dame Couture, Julie Fehler and Holly Greenhagen, also draw inspiration from classic movie stars in their custom dress designs (left). Clients can select color and fabric; prices start at \$300 and include a fitting.