**‘Capital Girls’ a sort of ‘Gossip Girl’ crossed with ‘Pretty Little Liars’**

**By** [**Monica Hesse**](http://www.washingtonpost.com/monica-hesse/2011/03/04/AB36ExN_page.html)**, Published: August 6**

Their children left for college. And then Maz Rauber and Amy Reingold launched a project capitalizing on their strongest areas of expertise: Teenage girls and the U.S. capital.

Imagine “Gossip Girl,” but Washington-ized. Imagine if the power of “The West Wing” mated with the sleaze of “Jersey Shore” and the money of “Real Housewives of New York” — and the resulting offspring looked like “Pretty Little Liars,” but the falsehoods in question could derail the U.S. government. Imagine how oozy-rotten addicting that would be for your brain.



(St. Martin's Griffin) - “Capital Girls” by Ella Monroe (the pseudonym for local writing duo Marilyn Rauber and Amy Reingold).

When Rauber and Reingold first pitched the idea to an agent, she sighed. “Five years ago,” in the fatter days of book publishing, she said, “I could have sold that on concept alone.”

But no. Rauber and Reingold’s new series “[Capital Girls](http://capitalgirlsbooks.com/)” had to happen now. It’s primed for this time of low approval ratings, of government stink eye — this time when the only way to get elected to go to Washington is to talk about how much you hate Washington.

It’s equally primed for this era in young adult literature when it seems like heroines are either master archers fighting in post-apocalyptic death matches or master back-stabbers fighting in post-adolescent grapples to get to the top of the social ladder (a marginally different kind of death match).

St. Martins Press bought the series in a three-book deal, published under the pseudonym Ella Monroe. The WB has already optioned a television adaptation.

The first book, “Capital Girls,” released Tuesday, introduces Jackie, the daughter of the chief of staff to the U.S. president. She’s dating Madame President’s son, Andrew, but sneaking into well-appointed offices with a handsome, older Hill aide. This dalliance leaves the door open for her friend Laura Beth, a Republicenne who fantasizes about a party-crossed love match with Andrew herself. Both girls mourn Taylor — a member of their clique who died in a mysterious car accident the year before — and suss out the motives of Whitney, the new-girl daughter of a gossip columnist who seems like she’s out to get them. Probably because she is out to get them.

All of these relationships become entangled with the president’s announcement of a new immigration act. If it doesn’t pass, that could result in the deportation of the girls’ Paraguayan friend, Lettie, the only 99 percenter in the book.

“We tried to keep some foundation of Washington —” Rauber says.

“But of course it’s not meant to teach you about term limits, or how the government works,” Reingold adds.

“Everybody loves to fantasize — about having fabulous clothes, a fabulous life,” she says.

This particular fantasy began more than 15 years ago, when Rauber’s daughter, Phoebe, and Reingold’s daughter, Celia, were kindergartners at Lafayette Elementary in Chevy Chase. The girls eventually landed at different schools, but their mothers remained part of the same kaffeeklatsch. When Phoebe and Celia graduated from the Field School and Georgetown Day four years ago, Rauber and Reingold — respectively, a former congressional reporter for the New York Post and a Cordon Bleu-trained chef — decided to line their empty nests with pulp fiction.



Katherine Frey/The Washington Post - Friends since their children were in kindergarten, Amy Reingold, left, and Maz Rauber, co-authored a forthcoming young adult trilogy about overprivileged teens in Washington, D.C.

“Our kids’ lives aren’t nearly as exciting” as those of the characters in their books, Rauber says. “Or if they are, they don’t tell us.”

She and Reingold are lounging in the kitchen of the Silver Spring apartment that Rauber and her husband downsized to a few years ago when their younger child, a son, left for college. Phoebe, freshly graduated from NYU, wanders into the room and accepts a cup of coffee from her mom. She’s as stylish as the characters in her mother’s books — long hair, short skirt, oversize top — but a good deal more friendly, and a lot less . . . mean.

“I think the book does capture the specific weirdness of growing up in D.C.,” Phoebe says. The motorcades, the power, the international bent. “The parents who are either part of something big or think they are.”

Phoebe and Celia were their mothers’ reality checks; there were a few scenes in the first draft of the book that Phoebe insisted be removed. Not because they were too outlandish but because they were too real, based on the actual exploits of her high school friends.

When she got to college, Phoebe was surprised at how little her new classmates knew about her home town. “I ran into a few people who thought that the White House *was* Washington” — that the District was literally populated only by the inhabitants of 1600 Pennsylvania Ave.

Not that “Capital Girls” hugely dispels that myth. The mistresses of this fictional universe have closets full of Kennedy Center-appropriate clothing. They flit to Baked & Wired for mandatory cupcakes, squeeze in blowouts at Aveda, celebrate birthday dinners at Cafe Milano, buy birthday gifts along Friendship Heights’ tony Wisconsin Avenue strip.

These addresses might not technically constitute the White House — sometimes they’re actually in Maryland — but they represent the Washington of people’s nightmares. This version of the city is always insidery and clubby, always populated by grabby dealmakers and funded by ethical bankruptcy. Aside from a few mentions in the book of Ben’s Chili Bowl and the city’s vast rich/poor divide, one would never know that Washington is also a city of teachers and doctors and small-business owners; one wouldn’t guess that “Capital Girls” could just as easily be about the daughters of a bunch of program officers for struggling nonprofit organizations.

But then, it’s not the responsibility of young adult literature — or any one book, really — to comprehensively tell the story of an entire city. The best ones, however, will illuminate a small piece of it. With that in mind, “Capital Girls” becomes a glammed-up anthropology of the country’s future power-mongers, whom you may choose to envy or fear.