

## People

# A cute pig tale



Ian Falconer, an artist who's designed sets and costumes for ballet and opera companies all over the world, is still surprised by the wild success of his children's book, "Olivia."



Acclaimed artist Ian Falconer goes whole hog with 'Olivia,' his first children's book and a huge holiday hit

By MICHAEL GLITZ

**F**loise should be rather careful. Madeline better stay in line. Yes, there's a new star in children's books: Olivia the pig.

Olivia is a very confident little girl, and she has every reason to be. Her first book — modestly titled "Olivia" (\$16, Atheneum) — has snowballed into the breakout hit of the holidays, garnering rave reviews from Time and Newsweek as well as best-of-the-year accolades from Publishers Weekly. It's flying off store shelves.

All this attention is for a droll little tale about a pig who builds exceptional sandcastles, pooh-poos a Jackson Pollock painting ("I could do that in about five minutes," says Olivia) and tires out everyone else long before she wears herself.

Success has certainly caught the book's New York author, Ian Falconer, by surprise.

"Surreal is the best word for it,"

says Falconer, who is 41 but looks much younger. "I had no idea 'Olivia' would do this."

An acclaimed artist, Falconer has designed sets and costumes for ballet and opera companies around the world — including the New York City Ballet. He's also done more than a dozen witty, distinctive covers for The New Yorker.

But success in other realms means little in the cutthroat world of children's publishing, an industry deluged with mundane picture books by celebrities and thousands of titles by unknown authors.

"I came up with the story about four years ago for my niece, Olivia," explains Falconer, who based his heroine on her. "It got better and better, so I got in touch with an agency. They loved the illustrations but wanted me to work with a published writer. I really didn't want to give it up, so I put it away."

Last year, Simon & Schuster saw his New Yorker covers and

called to see if Falconer would consider illustrating a children's book.

"It was so easy," he says. "I was nervous as hell bringing it to them, of course."

Launched with a first printing of 15,000 copies, "Olivia" quickly caught fire and has gone back to press several times. It now can boast 250,000 copies in print — an impressive number even for superstars of the genre, like Maurice Sendak and Chris Van Allsburg.

Falconer believes one reason is the cover — a spare design with Olivia proudly modeling a red dress against a white background. It's just a pig and the book's title, without even the name of the author to clutter things up.

"After I began working on 'Olivia,' I started sniffing around bookstores," says Falconer. "When you look at a display of picture books, they're all compet-

ing for attention. That's why I did the cover that way. The publisher and I agreed to keep it simple and plain."

Falconer believes that the mix of celebs endorsing the book adds to its success. "Olivia" sports admiring quotes from Mikhail Baryshnikov, Dame Joan Sutherland, painter David Hockney, "Eloise" illustrator Hilary Knight and even Gloria Steinem ("At last, a pig with self-esteem!").

Other admirers — the sort who know a plush doll in the making when they see one — have tried to latch on to the potential mini-industry of Olivia toys, games and collectibles.

"Even before the book came out, studios and toy manufacturers were calling," says Falconer. "I haven't done any of that yet because I don't want it to get too commercial too fast."

First, he needs to meet a

January deadline for the second Olivia tale.

"She's going to school to read a report on her summer vacation — which she exaggerates wildly," reveals Falconer.

As for the real Olivia, Falconer says his 7-year-old niece is unfazed by her sudden celebrity.

"I think it's going to ruin her life, like Alice Little from 'Alice in Wonderland,'" jokes Falconer. "But Olivia just takes it all for granted. It's very funny. I had a book signing in Connecticut, and my sister brought her along. She instantly came over and started signing the books with me — as if it was expected!"

Naturally, the people patiently waiting in line for the autograph of Falconer wondered what was going on.

"I had to explain to the people, 'This is the real Olivia,'" he says. "Then they got excited."