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Book Title Trends

With (or without) Love, from Me to You

by Celia Scher Wagner (Blackwell)

I once took a course called "Daily Themes" in which each student wrote a story or sketch every day, for an entire term. Professor Gordon, survivor of reams of undergraduate prose, thundered at us only once, on the first day of class. "No theme," he intoned, speaking slowly and glaring out over his glasses, "shall end with the sentence: 'He turned ... and walked away.'"

I don't know why this tickled me so much. Maybe I'd been planning on "He turned and walked away" as a boffo ending to some sketch. I did, suddenly, realize that endings were going to be hard, and that many a neat, dramatic, and even catchy finale had probably Been Done Before.

Lately, I find myself envying Professor Gordon: he could thunder at a captive audience. After seventeen years in the academic book business, I've gotten twitchy about clichéd book titles. I want to pound a podium and lay down a law of my own. "Listen up, authors and editors," I would say, a strange and mildly homicidal glint in my eye, "No more *From Warthog to Watchdog*, okay?!"

That's not a real title, of course. But the truth is, the *From ... To*'s are taking over. In the past six years, 753 new titles followed the *From ... To* formula. I know—I counted them. And while many of them might have seemed inspired at the time, they weren't all original. There were three *From Sea to Shining Sea*'s, three *From Slavery to Freedom*'s (and one *From Freedom to Slavery*), two *From Rhetoric to Reality*'s, two *From Cradle to Grave*'s, three *From Confrontation to Cooperation*'s, three variations on *From Margin(s) to Mainstream*, and that's just a sample.

Outright duplication isn't the only problem. Within the *From ... To*'s, there are several irritating subgroups. First come the Alphabetical titles: *From Abbeville to Zebulon*, *From Achilles' Heel to Zeuss' Shield*, *From Ackley to Zwingle*, *From Afghanistan to Zimbabwe ... all the way to From Al to Zeitgeist*.

Then there are the truly and the metaphorically Geographic: *From the Pecos to the Powder*, *From Hanoi to Holly-*

wood, and so on. (In the geographic group, Hollywood is the most popular destination, with folks arriving there from Hanoi, from Harlem, and from "Skunk Ranch," among other places. Broadway and the White House are also favorite stopping points, as is the Yalu. Don't feel bad if you have to look this one up. I did too. Eden, alas, is the most common point of departure.) Teetering between metaphor and Valley-speak is the intriguing: *From the Other to the Totally Other*. And closely related to the metaphorically Geographic is a group that might be called "how far we've come (or not)": *From Front Porch to Back Seat*, *From Chocolate to Morphine*, *From Mammy to Miss America* and *From Mangle to Microwave* spring to mind.

Then there are the Rhymes. Both *From My Guy to Sci Fi* and *From Yale to Jail* have a certain punch, but many of the rest are stretching: *From Uptight to All Right*, for instance. Please.

Annoying as these are, though, a tough book person can cope with them. The *From ... To* that is driving at least me to distraction is the Alliterative. Some of these are more poetic than others: *From Lathes to Looms*, and *From the Velvets to the Voidoids* roll pretty nicely on the tongue. But out of 753 *From ... To*'s, 238 featured alliteration, with a positively profound prevalence of P's:

From Palace to Prison
From Pasture to Polis
From Patients to Persons
From Plant to Politics
From Pop to Punk
From Power to Partnership
From Prayer to Pragmatism
From Prejudice to Persecution
From Puritanism to Postmodernism
From Pyramid to Pillar

I could go on. And once a hypersensitivity to the alliterative form sets in, the patient (now a person, see above) can detect even hidden alliterations: *From Soul to Psyche*, *From Cyd Charisse to Psycho*, *From New Math to Pneumonia*.

Worst of all are the combinations. The other day I stumbled across a rhyming alliterative tongue-twister: *From*

Dominoes to Dynamos. I just turned and walked away.

But I couldn't seem to quit. Now in full cranky title-searching mode, I wondered if the phrase "With Love" might also have been showing up a bit too often lately. Actually, it hasn't, though we had both *Cooking with Love* and *Cooking with Love and Honey*. (My all-time favorite Twee Title for a Self-Help Book, now out of print, was *Hello to Me with Love*.)

While "with love" isn't too prevalent, love itself is all around us. In the past six years, there have been 1,216 titles containing the words "love", "loving", "loved", and so on. Considering that there were only 42 titles featuring "hate" or "hatred," things may not be so bad. The seven deadly sins are in pretty short supply, too: Envy (9), Lust (15), Pride (37), Sloth (0, unless you count two about the animal), Wrath (16, mostly discussions of the Grapes of same); Avarice (1, but 29 on Greed); and a single title on Gluttony. Faith, Hope, and Charity, on the other hand, are going strong: at 439, 236, and 43, respectively.

Reflecting upon virtues and vices, I'm compelled to confess: I did fabricate one of the titles above. Other than *From Warthog to Watchdog*, that is. But only one ...