April 2003

IMHBCO (In My Humble But Correct Opinion) -- Sexing The Academy: Or, The Seductive Art of The Misleading Monograph Title

Rick Anderson

University of Nevada, Reno, serialsonline@unr.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/atg>

Recommended Citation

Anderson, Rick (2003) "IMHBCO (In My Humble But Correct Opinion) -- Sexing The Academy: Or, The Seductive Art of The Misleading Monograph Title," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 15: Iss. 2, Article 34.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.4044>

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.

IMHBCO (In My Humble But Correct Opinion)

Sexing The Academy: Or, The Seductive Art of The Misleading Monograph Title

by **Rick Anderson** (Director of Resource Acquisition, The University Libraries, University of Nevada, Reno, 1664 No. Virginia Street, Reno, NV 89557; Phone: 775-784-6500 x.273; Fax: 775-784-1328) <rickand@unr.edu>

Look, here's the thing: nobody really has any illusions about scholarly monographs being fun to read, right? I mean, I know there are some things you just don't say in a polite group of librarians, but surely we can all agree that the vast majority of university press and scholarly trade publications — whatever their significance to the marketplace of ideas and however valuable their contribution to the nation's academic health — are not books with which a normal person would look forward to curling up by the fire on a rainy afternoon. Not everything good and valuable has to be fun, after all.

So let's just take the essentially boring nature of scholarly monographs as a given, and let's put that assumption to work as a partial explanation for a strange and wonderful marketing practice that dominated the academic marketplace throughout the 1990s: the strategy of taking impenetrable theoretical treatises and gussying them up with sexually suggestive titles. I'm not talking about books that genuinely deal with sex and sexuality, but do so in a dry and academic way — I'm talking about books that were given steamy titles despite the fact that they had little or nothing to do with sex.

I believe this practice emerged from the confluence of two simultaneous trends: the rise of postmodernism and Cultural Studies (whose exponents have a well-established love of sexually provocative language and an even more well-established aversion to rhetorical clarity)

Books Are Us from page 83

the author, **Adriana Trigiani**, who sat down with Iva Lou Wade Makin, *Big Stone Gap's* favorite librarian, for an interview. From this writing technique one feels very strongly that Iva Lou is either very real or based on someone very real in Big Stone Gap. This prompted me to contact **Ms. Trigiani** to find out if Iva Lou is based on someone she actually knows. She responded: "Iva Lou Wade Makin is an amalgam of different librarians I knew. My mother is a librarian, so I felt a calling to make your wonderful profession a bit more real — and certainly more fun! I loved my librarians growing up and they guided my reading choices, so I am forever indebted to them."

Adriana Trigiani grew up in Big Stone Gap, Virginia, in the 1970s. She now lives in New York City with her husband and new baby. She is an award winning playwright, television writer and producer, and documentary filmmaker. She has written the screenplay for the film version of *Big Stone Gap*, and she plans to direct the film.

and the decline of the scholarly book market. Sales were starting to head down in the 1990s, while the number of academics writing obliquely about the performativity of gender and hegemonic hermeneutics was still as high as ever. The need to sell just as many arid scholarly monographs in an increasingly selective marketplace resulted naturally in a flood of deliciously absurd book titles, the likes of which we're not likely to see again for some time. All were apparently formulated with the bored academic in mind: someone so desperate for a book written on an intrinsically interesting subject that he (or she) would take one glance at the title and immediately snatch it up without bothering to dig deeper — or even, in many cases, read the subtitle.

One of the more elegant examples of this practice comes courtesy of the **State University of New York Press**, a house that mastered the technique quite early on in the game and which published **Todd C. Parker's** *Sexing the Text*. Now, you need to understand that in Cultural Studies parlance, the verb "to sex" has nothing to do with sex as in "I wanna sex you up." "Sex" is a transitive verb, but its object is always an abstraction. When cultural theorists use the verb "to sex," they generally mean "to endow with gender-specific significance." **Parker's** book is a case in point, as you can see by looking at its subtitle: *The Rhetoric of Sexual Difference in British Literature, 1700-1750*. That date range is the real clincher. Right up until that point, it almost sounds as if the book might offer a hint of prurient interest, but that 1700-1750 (not only historically remote but also narrow) is enough to discourage the most desperate literary thrill-seeker.

This rhythm of anticipation and disappointment is typical. Consider **Ursula A. Kelly's** *Schooling Desire* (What's this? A little boarding-school fantasy scenario?): *Literacy, Cultural Politics and Pedagogy* (Oh. Nope.) or **Peggy Phelan's** *Mourning Sex* (What? Morning sex?): *Performing Public Memories* (Feh. Skunked again.). In the latter, the author "meditates on the trauma of loss, erotically and performatively" and "advances performance theory in dialogue with psychoanalysis, queer theory and cultural studies." This is not a promising blurb, though I suppose a mental image of the author meditating in an erotic and performative manner could hold a certain perverse attraction. Then there's *Sexing the Groove: Popular Music and Gender*, in which various cultural critics take turns avoiding any real discussion of sex in pop music. Instead, they unburden themselves of essays with titles like "Feeling and Fun: Romance, Dating and the Performing Male Body in the Take That Videos" and "Seduced by the Sign: An Analysis of

the Textual Links between Sound and Image in Pop Music Videos."

Less artful than *Sexing the Text* but more impressive in terms of sheer brazenness is a book from 1997 by **Melanie Weber**. Its main title is *Erect Men/Undulating Women*, and its subtitle is very long. The editors probably hoped you'd decide to buy it before getting to the end. It goes like this (big breath): *The Visual Imagery of Gender, Race and Progress in (guesses, anyone?) Reconstructive Illustrations of Human Evolution*. Yes, this is a book that explores the subtle "paleoanthropological conventions" that are socially constructed by means of those pictures that depict man's evolution from a knuckle-walking ape to an erectly walking human. (Get it? *Erectly*?) I'm not sure how feminine undulation figures in this thesis, because I haven't read the book. And I don't think I'm going to.

Here's another fun example, this one courtesy of author **Henry Krips** and **Cornell University Press**. Title: *Fetish*. Subtitle: *An Erotics of (wait for it...) Culture*. The word "culture" in a book title is not generally the harbinger of a scintillating read, but still, this one has possibilities. Maybe it's about pornography, you think to yourself, or about why **Kevin Kline** kept sniffing **Jamie Lee Curtis'** shoes in *A Fish Called Wanda*. Inquiring academics really might like to know these things! Then you check out the table of contents and come face to face with chapter titles like "Interpassivity and the Knowing Wink: Mystery Science Theater 3000" and "The Ambassador's Body: Unscreening the Gaze." Oh, well.

There are so many more. **Anne Fausto-Sterling's** *Sexing the Body* hints strongly at a certain amount of, um, practical applicability, but then you hit the subtitle: *Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality*. And let's not even talk about **Elspeth Probyn's** equally misleading *Sexing the Self*, which carries the deflating subtitle *Gendered Positions in Cultural Studies*. **Robert Young's** 1994 monograph is intriguingly titled *Colonial Desire* (Mmm, new details on Jefferson and Hemings? Maybe something about the kinky secrets of those black-clad Puritans?) only to disappoint with the subtitle *Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*. Another fine example is *Perverse Desire and the Ambiguous Icon* by **Allen S. Weiss**, which offers no subtitle and therefore waits to disappoint the reader until the table of contents, which includes chapter titles like "Innate Totems:

continued on page 85

Talk of the Trade

by **Barry Fast** (Deltabooks, 186 Crooss Street, City Island, NY 10464;
Phone: 718-885-9563) <barry0112@aol.com>

IT'S ONLY A MATTER OF TIME UNTIL THE HOMELESS DISCOVER THE POWER OF ONLINE BEGGING

When **Karyn Bosnak** moved from the Midwest to New York, she soon found out that this city is a shopping mall, just like home, only bigger and better. It took her just a few months to run her credit card up to \$20,000, an amount she had no hope of ever paying off. But **Karyn** is nothing if not resourceful, so she set up a Website, *www.SaveKaryn.com*, and posted a message explaining her plight: "I need \$20,000 to pay off my credit card...I'm really nice and asking for your help...if you have an extra buck or two, please send it my way." **Karyn** not only got twenty thousand of those extra bucks, but she was also sent many gifts, such as **Yankee** tickets (she auctioned them on **eBay**), garden vegetables from Ohio (she froze them) and coupons for dates with a guy named **Dave** (poor **Dave**). Now **HarperCollins** has rewarded her ingenuity with a book deal, including an advance of about \$30,000. **Karyn** describes her forthcoming tome as a "madcap memoir of living in Manhattan, running up crazy debt, and ending up in the poorhouse. Like *Bridget Jones meets Confessions of a Shopaholic*." She will include valuable advice, such as keeping a credit card for emergencies only, and "a pair of boots on sale is not an emergency." I have some advice for a certain acquisitions editor at **HarperCollins**: Lay off those Grey Goose martinis when an agent is pitching a book over lunch.

BUT AT LEAST SHE ZIPPED UP THE FLY

Former **Paramount Studios** honcho **Robert Evans'** memoir, *The Kid Stays in the Picture*, recounts an embarrassing moment for him and his wife, **Ali McGraw**. The fashionista **Halston** designed a spectacular dress for their audience with the **Queen**, but when **Ali** put it on just before the event, **Evans** complained that it was much too revealing. Hurriedly **Ali** changed into a demur pantsuit, resulting in loud outcries from the British tabloids criticizing **Ali's** bad taste and lack of respect for **Her Majesty**. The next morning **Halston** called **Evans**, asking him why his wife had not worn the dress he'd designed for this occasion. **Evans** explained "the plunging neckline completely showed my wife's breasts." **Halston** was understandably miffed because **Ali** had put the dress on backward.

IMHBCO from page 84

Radiophony." *Sexuation*, a collection of essays edited by **Renata Salec**, is also ambiguously encouraging on its face. Then you hit the essays: "Freud's Moses and the Ethics of Nomotropic Desire," "On Semblances in the Relationship Between the Sexes," etc. Grateful as I am to be offered a resolution to my ongoing ethical struggle with nomotropic desire, I'm not at all sure there's much fun reading to be had here. And don't forget **Carl Eby's** book *Hemingway's Fetishism: Psychoanalysis and the Mirror of Manhood*. According to the jacket copy, "Critics have long acknowledged **Hemingway's** lifelong erotic obsession with hair, but this book is the first to explain in a theoretically coherent manner why **Hemingway** was a fetishist and why we should care." (They have? It does? We should?) To be fair, this one really does seem to be about sex, so the title isn't really that misleading. But it's hard to imagine that anyone titillated by the title *Hemingway's Fetishism* will likely find much gratification in the pages of this book.

With the advent of a new millennium, the Cultural Studies movement seems to be on the downhill side of its natural arc, and the practice of artificially sexing-up scholarly monograph titles is now, sadly, on the decline. But these things do have a natural tendency to come around again; the practice seems to be on about a 60-year cycle. It was only 70 years ago that **Charles Shelby Gibbs** authored the pioneering classic of the genre: *A Guide to Sexing Chicks*. His book was about determining the gender of baby chickens, of course. There's probably a plaque in his honor on the wall of an English department somewhere. 🌿

Artaud's Drawings" and
"Broken Voices, Lost
Bodies: Experimental

COMB-OVER IS IN, AND SO ARE BODY-PIERCING AND BOTOX

If a word is used five times in five different places over five years, the editors of the *Shorter Edition* of the *Oxford English Dictionary* will consider it for inclusion. The newest edition, just published, includes 3500 new words that made the cut. Joining the Taliban are Prozac and Viagra. Chat rooms, snailmail and sticker shock combine with spinmeister, airport novels and arm candy (a good looking young woman with an older but wealthy guy). The *Shorter* is an historical dictionary, intent on recording every word in common usage since 1700. Priced at \$150, it seems to me a priceless record of how our language evolves and prospers. In a *New York Times* piece on the new edition, the co-editor **Angus Stevenson** was asked for his personal favorite new word. "Go com-mando," said **Mr. Stevenson**, which means to go out on a date wearing no underwear.

THE NIGHTMARE AT HOGWARTS SCHOOL: HARRY POTTER EXPELLED?

When **JK Rowling's** told the press that she is taking a little more time to complete the next *Harry Potter* blockbuster, share prices of **Bloomsbury Press PLC** declined 26% from its 52 week high. This happened despite the \$40 million cash reserve that *Harry* has produced for **Bloomsbury**. Suddenly the market recognized that **Bloomsbury** without *Potter* was a fine literary press, profitable and respected, but a bit worrisome. And according to the *Wall Street Journal*, **Bloomsbury's** CEO **Nigel Newton**, agreed. He began using the *Potter* cash pot to buy some British reference publishers like *Who's Who*. He launched a children's book line in America where, unfortunately, he'd sold the *Potter* rights to **Scholastic** before anyone knew how big the series would become. **Bloomsbury** is also changing its publishing philosophy, moving away from the literary to the more popular, such as last year's successful *Kitchen Confidential*. Coming soon, an illustrated book entitled *All My Life for Sale*, wherein the author describes how he sold everything he owns over the Internet, including his sideburns packed in a plastic bag. Soon to be a major motion picture?

BIN LADEN'S MYSTERIOUS GIRLFRIEND CON- DEMNS RELIGION AND HARVARD

Who is **Kola Boof**, and why is she posing topless on the cover of her book, *Long Train to the Redeeming Sin*? Don't try to find out by calling her publisher, **North African Book Exchange** in Fullerton, CA. No one answers the phone there. You might want to ask famed **New York University** law professor, **Derrick Bell**, who read *Long Train*, admired it and began an email conversation with **Ms. Boof**. **Bell** defends her against critics who think her life story just doesn't add up. **Ms. Boof**, from southern Sudan, was raised in the Muslim faith and witnessed the murder of her parents by Sudanese rebels when she was 8, or 10, or 12, depending on which version of her life you hear. She somehow fled to America and was adopted by an African-American family whose name she won't reveal. For a time in the 1990s she says she was **Osama bin Laden's** mistress. She eventually left Islam behind her, condemning its treatment of women. When she attacked all organized religion, saying "For just as **Harvard University** is an institution created by men, so is every religion" a fatwa was issued against her by Sudanese clerics. However, the government of Sudan knows of no fatwa against her. She claims she was shot at in Oakland, California, and shot back, and as a result is under FBI protection. But the FBI knows of no protection they are giving her. "That's their way of protecting me," she says.

Her book was selling very slowly over an Internet site called *AALBC.com*, a bookselling site specializing in African-American titles. But **Ms. Boof** joined with some political activists who are working against slavery in Sudan, and launched an intense Internet campaign to promote herself and her book. She appeared on radio talk shows, and her book, languishing near number 190,000 on **Amazon's** bestseller list, jumped to number 951. "I can't deny I'm a conniving person," **Ms. Boof** admitted.

continued on page 86