Talk of the Trade

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It's Just a Misunderstanding; He Didn't Know That Gaol Meant Jail

Lord Jeffrey Archer, best selling novelist, member of the House of Lords, and convicted felon, still can't seem to get it. In my last column, I reported that Archer met with his publisher, Macmillan, in violation of prison rules which prohibit inmates from conducting business while incarcerated. Now the New York Times reports that his lordship has been moved from an "open prison," which permitted him brief home visits. Instead of staying in his house, as required, Archer attended a party in another county. Obviously struggling with the concept of rehabilitation, the famous author has been moved to a more traditional prison with bars and no home visits.

Coming Soon: My Memoir, Featuring Favorite Airports and Holiday Inn Bars

According to a recent survey, 81% of Americans think they have a great idea for a book and hope to write one. Is this just hubris? Or are we a nation of potential authors, on such a scale that no other society comes even close? Jason Epstein, author of 14 books, former editor and now teacher at Northwestern University, offers his views in a New York Times op-ed piece. This desire to write, the belief that one can and should record thoughts and experiences on the printed page, is an attempt to avoid the "oblivion" that awaits all of us. But, says Epstein, we should resist the impulse. Of the 80,000 new books published each year, the overwhelming majority attain their own form of oblivion. The last thing we need is more unwanted, unsold, unread books. Writing is a lonely task that consigns one to "mental imprisonment." Epstein blames the urge to write on the American notion of equality, that nearly everyone is creative in some way. Creativity has been overused in our culture that "even God must be embarrassed."

Letters to the Editor quickly followed the Epstein piece, all of them critical. Outraged New Yorkers said that if we follow Epstein's advice, no one would train for a marathon, no one would take a painting or pottery class, no one would try to cook the perfect dinner. Since most of our creative efforts are doomed to mediocrity, why even try to indulge the fantasy? Are we aspiring authors because we want to avoid oblivion, or perhaps instead we believe in the very American idea of the "pursuit of happiness"? Perhaps trying to write a novel or paint a masterpiece or win a race makes a lot of people happy. Except Epstein.

The Wall Street Journal's Ulema Is Better Than The New Yorker's Ulema

No continuously published magazine has been more influential, more literary, and more in-crowd than The New Yorker. It is still around since the 1920s because it has reinvented itself just in time, several times in its history, and its latest incarnation is piloted by David Remnick. He took the reins after Tina Brown left to create Talk, which was financed by Miramax and doomed from the start, a victim of the excesses of the '90s, a printed version of the dot com bubble. Brown arrived at The New Yorker just in time about a decade ago, as the magazine was bleeding subscribers and advertisers. It had become old, stultifying, predictable. Brown, amid much criticism, went well beyond a spruce up, introducing photographs, letters from readers, bylines, and new, hipper content. Dumbing down, some called her changes, and others lamented the shorter articles, the color pictures, and the coverage of popular culture. But the writing got better, the long serialized books from McPhee, Halberstam and others continued, and the magazine was suddenly compelling again.

Now Remnick's New Yorker is under attack by the Wall Street Journal's influential media critic, Tunku Varadarajan. Not only does he find it unreadable and boring (especially the columns written by Remnick), he also accuses the magazine of committing the unpardonable sin of reflecting a leftist political viewpoint. This of course, is diametrically opposite the Journal's rightist viewpoint. Hold on, hold on. Imagine this, a magazine with a long tradition of political comment and higher brow, even literary pretensions, viewing the political landscape from the left of center. You would think it was published in Vermont. But Varadarajan goes even further, condemning the editors for promoting the politics of New York's most notorious quasi-socialist neighborhood: As you read The New Yorker "you feel you are in the stifling embrace of a clerical clique, a kind of Upper West Side ulama, that reflects a prevailing, self-satisfied code.” If that doesn't get you picketing the magazine, nothing will.

In case you forgot, an ulama is a "body of scholars trained in Muslim law," according to the New York Post.

More New Yorker Gossip: The Gender Wars and Eurocentric Fiction

For unknown writers, getting your short story published in The New Yorker meant you had it made: book contracts awaited you, and the tight knit publishing community included you in book launch parties all over town. The gatekeeper who allowed or disallowed entrance to this literary world has been Bill Buford, Fiction Editor for the magazine during the past seven years. Buford has a reputation for high literary standards, but with a penchant for "gay stories" and the inclusion of popular writers like Stephen King. Critics, however, said that he was often slow to respond to agent submissions.

"Sending stuff to him was like sending it to outer space," complained one prominent agent. Others charged that women were "unfairly neglected" when they compared the number of male to female authors in the pre-Buford days to the number published under Buford's reign: 36 men to 15 women in 2001, compared to 26 to 23 in 1993. Speaking to the New York Times, Buford declares he's not "hypnotized by the navel voice," only endeavoring to publish the best submissions.

Now Buford is moving on to do more writing on his own, both for the magazine and book publishers. Recently he wrote a fascinating New Yorker portrait of celebrity chef Mario Batali, which will be expanded into a Random House book. Replacing Buford is his long time assistant, Deborah Treisman, who is relatively unknown outside local literary circles. Buford claims she's virtually run the fiction department for the last year, and she promises to publish more new writers, especially those from Japan, China and Eastern Europe. She disputes the criticism that Buford published too many men, saying that fewer women send submissions.

The New Yorker has such an enormous influence on literary fashions and trends, as well as a genuine tradition for discovering new and interesting writers, that the appointment of Treisman is sure to bring us more edgy, more varied and innovative short stories. And hopefully more female voices. We can read Stephen King anywhere.

The Guy Just Can't Catch a Break

First it was the fatwa, and now he has to remove his shoes at airports all over the country. Book touring Salman Rushdie has been subjected to rather harsh security checks at airports, but it turns out not to be because of racial profiling. As he hops from city to city, his one-way tickets are setting off the security alarms.

See What Happens When You Don't Support Our War on Iraq

Germany's suffering economy has also affected the book trade. Overall, sales of German books are down 4% this year. The biggest drop is in self-help books. And they accuse us of being smug.

Gun Prof Shoots Himself In The Foot

We are a gun toting culture. Second Amendment fundamentalists have long supported their views by citing the fact that from our earliest colonial days, virtually all Americans were armed and dangerous, a virtual army ready to rush from their homes to defend their wives and kids against (you pick it) Indians, rebels, criminals and commies. But a landmark book by a respected historian, Michael Bellesiles, proved that early Americans were far more likely to have no guns, or at best, broken and useless guns. In Arming America: The Origins of a National Gun Culture, Bellesiles asserted that the early American gun culture is a myth. Using probate records, court documents and other evidence, Bellesiles showed that gun ownership was far more limited than previously thought. The book was greeted with shock and anger from the gun rights community, who have long cited Bellesiles as one of their chief opponents. But Bellesiles' work is now widely accepted as the definitive account of the early American gun culture.

80 Against the Grain / February 2003
If Stephen King Sells Poorly, Fire the Editor by Bruce Strauch (The Citadel)

In a move that stunned the publishing world, Ann Godoff — president, publisher and ed-in-chief of Random House Trade Group — was given the boot. "The industry is in total shock," said Suzanne Gluck of William Morris. Peter Olson, CEO of Random House says she was falling short of profit targets. "There's no contradiction between literary quality and financial results."


Losing Other Peoples' Money by Bruce Strauch (The Citadel)

Industry Standard, the "Newsmagazine of the Internet Economy" made $200 million in the flat year of 1999 but still failed spectacularly. IDG, owner of MacWorld, InfoWorld and the "Dummies" yellow paperback series launched a trade magazine about the Internet business in 1997. They hired John Battelle, first managing editor of Wired and a cast of supporting hipsters who predictably clashed with the conservative Boston-based IDG managers. Tens of millions got squandered, and Battelle seemed most interested in an IPO and the big money that could be made from ramping up the stock in those frenzied times. But the real end came with the crash of the Internet economy in 2000 and the mass flight of advertisers.


The Synergy That Wasn't by Bruce Strauch (The Citadel)

In Jan. 2000, CEO Gerald Levin sold Time Warner to AOL in a monster-hyped quest for synergy. At the time he said he sold because he couldn't figure out how to harness the Internet. Then he was put in charge of it all. No one noticed the irony. And of course it's been a total disaster. Among other non-synergistic aspects, its high speed Internet access strips money out of Warner Brothers music because customers download music for free. And Time Warner execs loathe techies and spend their time on corporate jets and in limos heading to the Four Seasons. Now the investment bankers will get paid huge fees a second time to tear it all apart.


Hypermass = Dumber Squared by Bruce Strauch (The Citadel)

Taste arbiter Pate Julius 11 gave us Michelangelo and Raphael. Today's culture magnates at Vivendi and Bertelsmann give us Christina Aguilera and Eminem. The decline of civilization is only going to get worse. Jean-Marie Messier designed "cross-market synergy" so you could have Britney Spears first as a pop star and then as a Bobblehead. Pierce Brosnan shamelessly touts Omega watches and BMWs in the midst of a James Bond movie. "Star Trek: Nemesis" is an awful movie but it "extends the Star Trek franchise" for selling other products. Yes, you live in a world of "cross-market Hypermass" where the formula is "target the lowest common denominator" — they think lower. "Reality TV" gives us Joe Millionaire which makes the original "Who Wants to Be A Millionaire" look like Masterpiece Theatre. But the technology that makes cross-platform selling possible also provides an escape route. That desired youth demographic is downloading music with Kazaa and ripping their own CDs. And when the undesired folks above 35 wise up, they can live on their own culture islands too.


Going While the Getting’s Good by Bruce Strauch (The Citadel)

Tommy Mottola was a huge success back when the music industry was simple. Promote a few superstars and give the customer a lousy deal. Now it’s all Napsterized, the execs are furious over the social injustice of them no longer getting rich, and Tommy is bailing out. Of course the industry’s madly lobbying Congress to “do something,” but there’s no way to stop the piracy. All digital signals have to be turned into analog signals before the human ear can hear them. And the technology to turn it back into digital is simple. And a KPMG study — one of those high-priced consultancies you read about — says the industry should quit fuming over piracy and develop the Internet’s potential to deliver quality products. But that would require pricing at a level that makes it not worth the trouble to steal. “A prediction: By the time Hollywood figures this out, Mr. Case will be back in charge of AOL.”