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Talk of the Trade

by **Barry Fast** (Deltabooks, 186 Cross Street, City Island, NY 10464; Phone: 718-885-9563)
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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 so 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 ten years 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. Horror of horrors! 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 ulema, that reflects a prevailing, self-satisfied code." If that doesn't get you picketing the magazine, nothing will.

In case you forgot, an ulema 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 "guy 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 male 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 docu-

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Bet You Missed It

Press Clippings — In the News — Carefully Selected by Your Crack Staff of News Sleuths

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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.”

See — **Jeffrey Trachtenberg**, “Random House Shows the Door To a Top Editor,” *The Wall Street Journal*, Jan. 17, 2003, p. B1.

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

Industry Standard, the “Newsmagazine of the Internet Economy” made \$200 million in the fat 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.

See — **Leah Nathans Spiro**, “Gigaflop,” a review of James Ledbetter, *Starving to Death on \$200 Million a Year*, *The Wall Street Journal*, Jan. 10, 2003, p. W1.

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.

See — **John Ellis**, “Case Closed,” *The Wall Street Journal*, Jan. 15, 2003, p. A10.

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ments and masses of other primary sources, **Bellesiles** showed that few Americans, even on the frontier, had working guns. The book was hailed for its originality and its importance to the anti-gun movement, and in 2001 **Bellesiles** was given **Columbia University’s** prestigious **Bancroft Prize** for historical writing.

There were only two problems with **Bellesiles’** argument: one was that it made no sense, it was counterintuitive, and two, his research was, to be kind, flawed. The first problem, the absurdity of believing that few Americans owned guns, even though they were vulnerable to Indian attacks and killed game for a large part of their diet, propelled a number of scholars to try to replicate **Bellesiles’** research. It emerged that the San Francisco probate records that **Bellesiles** quoted were all

Hypermass = Dumber Squared by Bruce Strauch (The Citadel)

Taste arbiter **Pope Julius II** gave us **Michelangelo** and **Raphael**. Today’s culture magnates at **Vivendi** and **Bertelsmann** give us **Christina Aguilera** and **Eminem**. And 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 — then 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 mixing their own CDs. And when the undesired folks above 35 wise up, they can live on their own culture islands too.

See — **Daniel Henninger**, “Modern Culture Creates Its Own Escape Routes,” *The Wall Street Journal*, Jan. 17, P.A10.

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.”

See — **Holman Jenkins**, “The Music Stops, Again,” *The Wall Street Journal*, Jan. 15, 2003.

destroyed in the 1906 earthquake. Primary sources in Vermont and Rhode Island did not match **Bellesiles’** charts, and when he set up a Website to confront his critics, the facts he mounted on the site did not check out either. **Emory University, Bellesiles’** employer, set up a blue ribbon panel of historians to decide the award winning professor’s fate. The committee reported that “it is almost impossible to tell where **Bellesiles** got his information....and he is guilty of unprofessional and misleading work.” **Bellesiles** is still defiant, but has resigned from **Emory**. It is unclear whether he will return the **Bancroft Prize**, or if **Columbia** will demand its return. One thing seems certain: early Americans used guns to hunt and protect themselves, and had they not, they would have been as foolish as those who awarded the **Bancroft Prize** to **Bellesiles**. 🐻