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Talk of the Trade

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Memo to Library Directors: Stay Home If You’re In a Bad Mood

The New York Times reports on the re-emergence of the revenge literary genre, first made famous in the last century by Mommy Dearest. Tell-all books are thriving in the post-Enron blame game world. A host of anti-boss memoirs or thinly disguised novels are about to hit bookstore and library shelves. These include: Lizzie Grubman's (tabloid babe of Hamptons crashing SUV fame) assistant will tell us what an awful person she is (duh), two novels and a screenplay describe what a witch Vogue’s Anna Wintour is (double duh), Graydon Carter of Vanity Fair is skewered by his former assistant, and hedge fund manager, CNBC talking head, and author of Confessions of a Street Addict James Cramer throws phones and destroys monitors, according to his assistant. The award for hypocrisy goes to Richard Blow for his American Son, a profile of his boss John Kennedy's years editing George magazine. When John-John died in the plane crash, Blow, the managing editor, forbade his staff to write anything about their famous boss. He then broke his own rule. The Times says that most of these memoirs reveal the moodiness of bosses, not their malfeasance. So stay upbeat in the office, or, as James Cramer says, never hire anyone with a "litletic bent."

Or Maybe It Was Linda Lovelace

Celebrating the 30th anniversary of the Watergate scandal, John Dean has published an eBook naming five suspects as the whistleblower dubbed Deep Throat. Woodward and Bernstein, the Washington Post reporters who relentlessly pursued the story, have vowed never to name their informant until he/she is dead. Guessing the identity has become political sport inside and outside Washington (A group of University of Illinois journalism students has been working on this mystery for three years). Prior to publication Dean intimated that he'd solved the puzzle, but in fact he names five people as contenders in his Unmasking Deep Throat. They are columnist, anti-immigration Neanderthal Pat Buchanan, former press secretary Ron Ziegler, Nixon assistant Steve Bull, special assistant Raymond Price, and Ziegler's assistant Jerry Warren. Others nominate Henry Kissinger, Al Haig and even Diane Sawyer. Woodward stays firmly above the fray, saying in the New York Daily News "it's about keeping our word for thirty years." Refreshing, isn't it.

And You Thought They Were Celebrating the Queen's Jubilee

According to The Guardian, Brits are "celebrating" the inclusion of the word "bonkbuster" in the online Oxford English Dictionary. This new literary term describes a best-selling novel where the characters have "frequent sexual contact" with each other.

Dumbing Down Achieves New High

C'mon, confess. We all used Cliff Notes in college. Especially when we hated the assigned books or prepared for an exam by staying out until 3AM at the local bar. It was dumb, but it was an EMERGENCY. Not any more. Those familiar yellow and black lifesavers, and onrushing competitor Sparknotes, are now squeezing 500 page popular novels like Harry Potter and Midnight's Children into fifty page summaries for busy social climbers. If you are not content with seeing the movie to fool your friends into thinking you read the book, you'll be able to find Cliff Notes or Sparknotes editions of Snow Falling on Cedars, All the Pretty Horses and Cold Mountain. If you followed Oprah's recommendation and read A Lesson Before Dying, but had trouble following the plot, Sparknotes will explain it to you. For a mere $4.99 a Sparknotes Harvard-educated writer will deifymsify Jurassic Park. If you ever thought book discussion group members had too much time on their hands, think again. They constitute a significant minority of Cliff Notes and Sparknotes buyers. A New York ad executive explains "I'm the typical 40 something professional, I have the same case of Attention Deficit Disorder my colleagues do." He buys Sparknotes to avoid embarrassment at his book club gatherings. And high achieving college students report that in 2000 Cliffs were used by 32.5% of them, up from 24.5% in 1993.

But, complains the New York Times, all too often the Cliff or Sparknotes writer exhibits his or her own brand of ADD, elucidating a theme or psychanalyzing a character incorrectly. Frank McCourt found a Cliff copy of his Angela's Ashes while on a book tour: "Something about the inevitable search for the father, Telemachus's search for Odysseus. The old, old story. Only I didn't know it."

Metaphor Attack: Are Books Pop Tarts or Chicken Cutlets?

More on Borders Bookstore's category management approach to ordering and displaying books: Ralph Nader, Noam Chomsky and other similar experts on the retailing business have sent a letter to Borders attacking their plan to appoint publishers to help Borders manage book categories, a widely practiced merchandising program in supermarkets. Their fear is that large publishers will shut out small publishers in the categories they co-manage with Borders' buyers. "There is a difference between books and Pop Tarts," the letter explains. They gripe that publishers are required to pay fees to manage a category, but Borders says these fees are charged to cover the costs of market research that will be shared with paying publishers. Ultimately, they say, most of the research will be shared with all publishers, including smaller non-paying presses. An organizer of the protest letter conceded that their fears "might be overblown," but went on to fault "too much market research" as damaging to unpopular books. "It's all right for chicken cutlets, but this as all about ideas."

With book sales increases at an all time low, and general agreement in the industry that too many non-selling new books are con-
ing to market, many publishers think that publishing suffers from too little, not too much, marketing research. “I think this is pretty snoop,” says Peter Osnos, a publisher at Perseus Book Group. “We need to sell more books and this may help.”

World’s Fastest Writer Scores
Big At St. Martin’s

“I think people have been waiting a long time for a book like this,” gushes her agent. Describing Dirty Girls Social Club as both “mainstream” and “speaking to this Hispanic population,” the literary agent goes on to say the book “toys with the stereotype of what it means to be Latin.” The author, Alisa Valdes-Rodriguez, wrote the book in just six (that’s 6) days. Yet “the characters dance off the page” according to the editor at St. Martin’s Press. “I can see women all over the country adoring this book.” Reporting on this accomplishment, the Washington Post seemed underwhelmed that this future blockbuster was completed in less than a week. Do the math: if Valdes-Rodriguez continues to write a book a week, rests on Sundays, and takes two weeks vacation a year, in just a decade or so she alone will exceed the total publishing output of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

World’s Fastest Reviewer Scores
Big At Amazon

Librarians quite rightly value book reviews as reliable, if not timely, resources for book selection. With over three thousand (that’s 3000) reviews posted on Amazon, Harriet Klausner has to be the most prolific reader and reviewer the world has ever known. According to Wired.com, Harriet pumps out an average of two reviews a day, many of which she also posts on AllReaders.com. She does have a day job, as a columnist for a couple of online magazines. Imagine her life, furiously reading and writing from the minute she awakes until the darkest hours before dawn. Then, in her moment of triumph, the earth’s fastest reviewer sends her literary criticism to the earth’s biggest bookstore. It’s possible that Harriet has influenced more book buying decisions than Choice and Oprah combined.

It’s a Good Thing

Busy Martha Stewart has no time to write her autobiography, as she bakes, decorates, gardens, sews, knits, paints, collects, gathers her blue eggs and battles insider trading suspicions. Scheduled to be published in 2003, The New York Post reports that the “publishing date has now been put off indefinitely.”

But Will They Start Paying
Full Retail and Avoid
Retirement in Miami Beach?

The Remnant: On the Brink of Armageddon, the latest in the blockbuster “Left Behind” series, predicts that many Jews will become Christians as the Apocalypse arrives. The evangelical authors, Timothy LeHaye and Jerry Jenkins, penned Desecration, the first volume in the series, and topped the best-seller lists last year. In their latest work, the authors say the People of Israel will at first welcome the Antichrist, but 144,000 Jews will see the light and convert.

Even Dead Parrots Are Grateful to
Celebrity Photographers

An arresting jacket photo of an author can boost a book’s sales, according to a recent Wall Street Journal article. The Creative Director of Little Brown warns, “If you leave an author alone, they’ll go to Sears and pop into a booth” to have their dust jacket picture taken. “These ‘deer in the headlights’

are as passé as TV anchormen without blow dried hair. Publishers pay as much as $3,000 to professional photographers who specialize in creating haunting pictures of deep-thinking writers. Marion Ettlinger is one of the most successful photographers, and her work is even sold in art galleries. The right kind of photo prompts newspapers and magazines to feature the author, and the resulting publicity can impact sales significantly. Writer Susan Issues disavows this trend, complaining she has become an “ambulatory ad” for her work. But the late Ken Kesey was so pleased with his jacket photo, showing him with his pet parrot on his shoulder, that when the bird died he sent a feather to the photographer.

Bet You Missed It

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

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EL SEVERE DRIVES A HARD BARGAIN
by Pamela M. Rose (University at Buffalo)

Despite the 24/7 access and a break on costs over print or individually subscribed journal titles, universities such as Cornell and the College of Charleston [our very own Katina is quoted in this article] and consortia in Virginia and Ohio are thinking twice about renewing contracts with ScienceDirect, the electronic database owned by Elsevier Science. Increasing costs, reduced budgets, and restrictive contractual requirements are pushing institutions to consider canceling their contracts and return to print or purchase cheaper non-Elsevier online titles. The collective action of libraries will be a definite factor for the publishing giant, who hopes to have 75% market penetration by the end of 2002. Still, new customers who include small colleges continue to sign on.


NATURE’S CHECK DIGIT
by Pamela M. Rose (University at Buffalo)

Nature made use of error coding systems long before your credit card company. Donall Mac Donnell of Trinity College Dublin suspected the four nucleotide bases A, T, G and C chosen out of 16 possible base combinations incorporated a tactic for minimizing the occurrence of errors in the pairing of bases. Using binary representation for each base in the site and a “check digit” for the type of nucleotide (single-ringed pyrimidine or double-ringed purine), he shows that nature banished any odd-parity nucleotides from the DNA alphabet. Essentially the A-T and G-C choices form the best pairs that are the most different from each other, thus minimizing errors.


HAVE PH.D., WILL A-B-C
by Pamela M. Rose (University at Buffalo)

Just got your Ph.D. and want to work with kids? The National Research Council has proposed two-year $35K per year fellowships to train scientists to use their skills in classrooms, offering a tremendous specialist resource for elementary schools as well as alternate career paths for budding researchers.