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Talk of the Trade

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Talk of the Trade

by Barry Fast (Deltabooks, 186 Cross St., City Island, NY 10464; Phone: 718-885-9563) <arry0112@aol.com>

The book trade is not as glitzy as the industry (Hollywood), but there is more than enough gossip to share. Here’s the latest book world buzz, some serious, some frivolous, all true.

But They Still Won’t Sell Wheaties

Borders, the second largest retail bookstore chain, will overhaul the way it selects and merchandises books. GregoryJosefowicz, the Chairman and CEO of Borders, says his stores will adopt “category management” to buy and promote books. First pioneered in the grocery business (Josefowicz rose from bagger to president over 22 years at Albertson’s), category management relies upon manufacturers and distributors to stock shelves and determine placement. Borders will modify category management by choosing publishers to manage 250 different book categories. These category managers will determine which titles will be bought, and how they will be arranged and displayed in the stores. Borders will have the final say, but will rely on these publishers, based on their expertise in each category. According to the Wall Street Journal, three examples have already been set up: HarperCollins will co-manage the Cooking and Romance categories, and Random House will co-manage the Young Readers

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category. Can publishers be relied upon to be fair to competitors’ titles in the category they co-manage? This remains to be seen, but there will be a strong incentive to keep Borders happy with the selections. Time, and sales within categories, will tell.

Slammin’ Sammy Snead Was Dead and Tiger Cost Too Much
The Boston Globe reports that John Updike scored 99, beating Chip McGrath and Ward Just in a tourney to promote The Ultimate Golf Book.

Next Time Try Jerry Springer
“It’s shocking” said a Powells (of Portland, Oregon) Bookstore manager, after the store sold only four copies of the book.

That’s hardly any, especially for something that hit Oprah.” A buyer for San Francisco’s famed A Clean Well Lighted Place asked rhetorically, “Why would anyone pay money for something that’s going to make them feel worse?”

This season’s biggest publishing disaster seems to be Sylvia Ann Hewlett’s Creating a Life: Professional Women and the Quest for Children. Not that Talk/ Miramax’s Tina Brown didn’t try. In addition to Oprah, Hewlett garnered appearances on 60 Minutes, The Today Show with a long Katie interview, Good Morning America and a Nightly News sit down with Tom. The L.A and New York Times editorialized, and The Nation added its intellectual weight to the discussion of the conflicts between career demands and baby-making. The book had every opportunity to lead the bestseller list, but it is not even in the top fifty. What happened?

No one knows for sure, but there are lots of theories. The media didn’t get it, and focused mostly on the difficulties of getting pregnant if a woman waits until her forties. (New York Magazine cover “Baby Panic!”)

The title was off-putting, and the cover photo was dead. Originally entitled Baby Hunger (still the title of the poorly selling British edition), the editorial and promotional team involved with the book found that “offensive” and insisted on the present title. Too much of the book reads like a long magazine article, say some critics. Others believe that most women already understand the trade-offs between careers and babies, have made their choices, and with all difficult life decisions, don’t need to revisit the issues. Whatever the reasons, author Hewlett is among the baffled: “I don’t know what to make of this absence of huge sales!” she said recently to the New York Times.

My Novel Is Bigger Than Your Novel
We have the National Book Award and Great Britain has the Booker, and never the twain shall meet—or so we thought. Few Americans know that the Booker Prize for Fiction has been sponsored by an English food retailer (here we go again with books and groceries). But this year the Man Group, a British money management firm, donated $3.5 million to the Booker committee, and hopes to use the prestige that leaks from the prize to enter the American market. And this means that the Booker committee, who selects the winner, may have to allow American writers to contend for the prize. Indeed, the committee chairwoman recently opined that American writers exist in a “different (meaning higher) league” than their British counterparts. “The American novels paint on a much bigger canvas,” said the Booker judge, Lisa Jardine. She drew a flurry of outraged reaction from the literary elite clustered between Oxford and London: Ian McEwan, winner of the 1998 Booker, said this remark reflected a “certain strain of British self-scrutiny — (the notion) is fatuous, cringing.” This concept of British inadequacy is, according to The Observer’s literary critic, “quasi-philistine, provincial and rather embarrassing.”

The Guardian published a cartoon showing a B52 bomber dropping novels instead of explosives on the British countryside. But the Brits hold firmly to the concept of fair play, which they invented and perfected. According to The Bookseller, a number of authors and publishers welcome the possible inclusion of American authors, which may happen in 2004.

Even Tom Clancy Loves New York Now
The famously New York-avoiding author of The Sum of All Fears and many other doomsday scenarios, says he never could have dreamed up the September 11 attack. In the past, publishers and agents would trek to Clancy’s 24 room Maryland estate for meetings, surrounded by over 400 acres of land with a grand view of the Chesapeake Bay and a Sherman tank parked on the front lawn (presumably unloaded). His sentiments about the city have changed slightly after watching us deal with the tragedy. Quoted in The New York Observer, Clancy admired the fortitude and good humor of ordinary citizens of the Big Apple “I didn’t think New Yorkers had this in them, but I was wrong about that,” he said. “I’m sure they’ll be back to their ass**** selves in a few weeks.” Despite his prediction, he has purchased a modest city abode on East 76th Street for over $2.5 million, a corner duplex with three bedrooms and four and a half bathrooms, herring-bone oak floors, an English roof garden and pool, just in time for summer swimming. We appreciate his vote of confidence.

Will U.S. Retaliate, Banning Cold Weather Fronts and Hockey Players?
Warning that their business will be devastated, Canadian booksellers are urging their government to block Amazon.com’s expansion into our NAFTA partner to the north. Amazon has to collaborate with an existing Canadian book distributor in order to physically enter the market, in accord with government rules (of course Amazon already sells millions of American books to Canadian purchasers over the borderless Internet). These rules require foreign booksellers to form a Canadian controlled partnership in order to sell Canadian books to Canadian consumers from a store or warehouse on Canadian soil. Yet the bookseller’s association is complaining that Amazon would be entering their market under “the false guise of Canadian partnership.” In other words, adhering to protectionist regulations results in accusations of deception. Joseph Heller, where are you when we need you? The association further argues that an Amazon physical presence in Canada would “devastate an important Canadian industry employing real book lovers in every community across Canada.” There are contrasting viewpoints, however. Amazon in Canada would employ local people — some of whom might be real book lovers — and sell Canadian rather than American editions, benefiting the publishing industry in Canada. Canadian distributor Raincoast tells the Financial Post that they are not the rumored Amazon partner, as Amazon announces a summer opening for their Canadian foray. The Amazon partner is BookExpress, which is owned by Raincoast Canadian book retailers treble, awaiting the blizzard from the south.

Nancy Drew Mystery Solved; She Isn’t, and Has Never Been, a Lesbian
She pounded away on her typewriter for three quarters of a century, writing 130 books and 23 of the Nancy Drew series, including the first one, The Secret of the Old Clock, in 1930. At the age of 96, Mildred Wirt Benson passed away in May. As Carolyn Keene, she was paid $125 for each of the popular detective novels, and prohibited by the publisher from revealing herself as the author. In one particularly productive year she wrote 13 Nancy Drew books.

Benson, in two interviews with Salon and the New York Times in 1999, said that girls were ripe for a change in the way young women were portrayed in literature. “I think Nancy was the character girls were waiting for—not her sex appeal, but how tough and smart and adventurous she is.” But the success of the series also confined her in ways she resented. “I’m so sick of Nancy Drew I could vomit,” she told a New York Times reporter at a Nancy Drew symposium at the University of Iowa in 1993, where Benson was the first person to earn a Master’s degree in Journalism in 1927. Scholars who study the Nancy Drew series have published learned treatises on the role of these novels continued on page 89

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in the formation of American culture, and feminist scholars have even found evidence of lesbianism in the series. Commenting on this insight, Benson said, “This is the silliest, most out-of-the-picture I ever heard. I'd like to blow a cork!” Benson, who outlived two husbands and is survived by a daughter, worked at the Toledo Blade newspaper until the last day of her life, when an ambulance transported her from her desk to the hospital.

**THE GHASTLY GETS MORE SO**

by Bruce Strauch (The Citadel)

The tedious and tiresome has become maddening and gruesome. Vast databases vomit up page upon page out of the maw of cyberspace anarchy, and bibliographic citations are now officially a nightmare. With no single authority, punctuation, abbreviation and what goes-in-what order is a jumbled mess. NISO is trying to unify standards, but it's bumping heads with ISO over library statistics. NISO wants to count them and ISO wants to measure them by the foot.


**TEETERING GIANT**

by Bruce Strauch (The Citadel)

Ziff Davis Media’s auditors say the illness may very well be terminal. Ziff Davis magazines depend on technology advertising which is the hardest hit in the ad depression. It lost $415.7 million over the nine months ending Dec. 31, ’01. Ye-gads! Imagine being the CFO in charge of that.


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