

Book magazine proudly presents ... a brief history of the literary world's most attention-getting publicity stunts, most audacious hoaxes and most memorable tomfoolery

Eric Wetzel

Book. (March-April 2003): p60+.

Copyright: COPYRIGHT 2003 Barnes & Noble, Inc.

<http://www.barnesandnobleinc.com/>

Full Text:

1868

The Ladies' Man

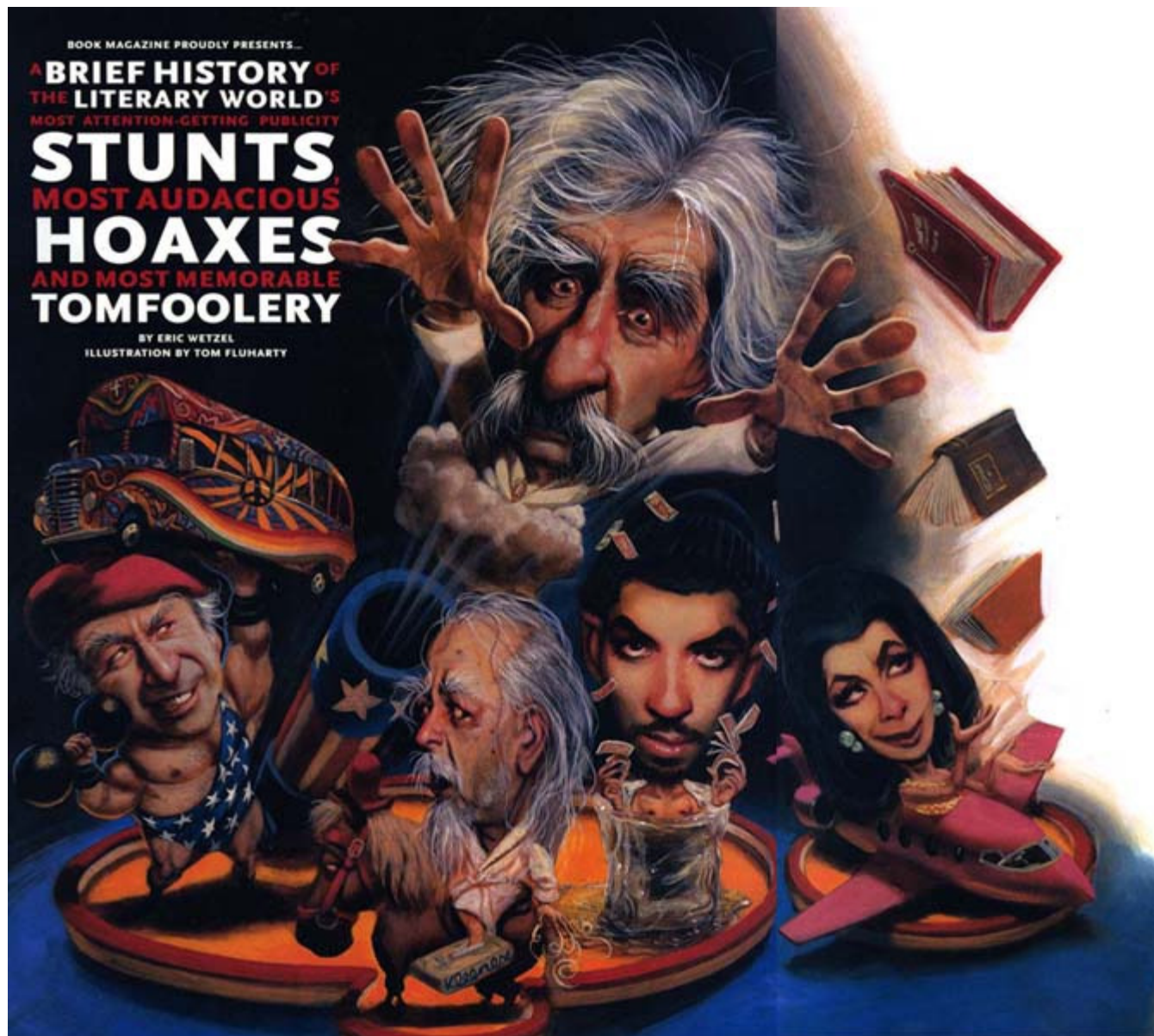
Mark Twain went looking for love and discovered the modern book tour along the way

Samuel Clemens wasn't the only nineteenth-century writer to employ the then-young science of marketing--Charles Dickens was another--but he might have been the most effective. He trademarked his pen name, he was always eager to talk to the press and, according to historian Geoffrey C. Ward, he once even strolled through London wearing nothing but a bathrobe in hopes of making the newspapers. (He did.) But Twain made his most significant contribution to the history of book PR in 1868, when he embarked on what he thought would be a straightforward speaking tour of the eastern half of the United States, a tour that a Newark newspaper billed as "both Humorous and Descriptive, but MAINLY HUMOROUS." (One of the real reasons Twain agreed to the tour was that it gave him a chance to visit the woman he was courting, in her hometown of Elmira, New York.) The speech he carried with him was nothing more than a hastily cobbled selection from a manuscript that would soon be published as *The Innocents Abroad*. Midway through the tour, while in Chicago, Twain realized that each engagement was a potential sales bonanza, and he immediately suggested two things: that the book's printing be expedited and that the door-to-door subscription agents who peddled his publications work overtime in the cities he was about to visit. The modern book tour had begun to take shape.

1926

The Unsolved Mystery

Agatha Christie vanished, and a nation of loyal suspense readers were on the case



During the first and second weeks of December 1926, England was a nation obsessed. Thirty-six-year-old Agatha Christie, the woman today known as the Queen of Crime, had disappeared from her home in Berkshire on the third of the month--her car was found abandoned near the town of Guildford--and the general public became fixated on the case overnight. According to a recent article in the *Guardian*, "The search for her body over the genteel Surrey Downs attracted thousands of police officers and members of the public as Britain became a nation of amateur sleuths." A couple of Christie's fellow mystery writers even got in on the act: Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the creator of Sherlock Holmes, brought a glove of Christie's to a spiritual medium (who was of little help), and author Dorothy L. Sayers was consulted as well. Sayers put forth a theory that soon became--and remains--popular. She felt the disappearance was a deliberate stunt "so cleverly staged as to be exceedingly puzzling--especially, as here, we are concerned with a skillful writer of detective stories, whose mind has been trained in the ways and means to perplex." The mystery ended--although it wasn't quite solved--eleven days later, when Christie surfaced in a Motel, claiming to have suffered a temporary case of amnesia. She stuck to the story until the day she died, but Jared Cade, her biographer, doesn't buy it. Cade points out that Christie checked into the hotel under the surname of her husband's mistress, and believes she was trying to teach her cheating spouse a little lesson about negative publicity.

1964

The Bus Driver

When Ken Kesey had a great notion, left the nest and hit the road, a legend was born

True, Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* is nested safely in the American canon--but it could be that the California novelist is better remembered for something totally different. The cross-country trip he and some friends made in a multicolored bus named "Furthur" [sic] was undertaken in part to celebrate the publication of his second book, *Sometimes a Great Notion*. The journey was immortalized in Tom Wolfe's *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*.

1967

The Conspiracy Theory

Leonard Lewin's molehill turned into a mountain when the wrong people read it

America was at its most unstable--with the Vietnam War heating up and race riots breaking out across the nation--when The Dial Press released *Report From Iron Mountain: On the Possibility and Desirability of Peace* in 1967. Completely bogus, the "report" was a book that claimed to summarize the findings of a group of policy experts who had supposedly met to discuss the consequences of peace. War, the "group" determined, was integral to the national economy and should be prolonged at any cost. In essence, the report was an attempt to criticize America's militaristic aggression. It caused a panic among public officials and even round its way onto the *New York Times* bestseller list. (According to an unnamed, and perhaps dubious, *U.S. News & World Report* source, President Lyndon Johnson was said to have "hit the roof" when he learned of its contents.) Critics disagreed as to who might have written the report; theories ranged from Henry Kissinger to economist John Kenneth Galbraith, who himself reviewed the book under a pseudonym. In 1972, writer Leonard Lewin admitted to having made the whole thing up in collaboration with Victor Navasky, who edited a magazine of political satire. Despite the admission, however, there are readers--many of whom belong to reactionary, right-wing political organizations--who still insist that the book is genuine.

1969

The Queen Mother

Jacqueline Susann showed the world of public relations how it's really done

Jackie Susann didn't invent book publicity (that should be obvious to you by now), but it's safe to say that she perfected it. The stunt for which this 1960s icon is best remembered might be her use of a personal jet during the signing tour for her 1969 novel *The Love Machine*--the airplane went by the same name, naturally--but that was just the tip of what was by then a mammoth iceberg of pure PR power. Susann, who got her start pitching sewing machines during the commercial breaks of a late-'50s TV talk show, was a walking publicity machine. She kept files on the likes and dislikes of booksellers around the country, did marathon radio interviews on a weekly basis and even sent vans to the bookstores that reported their sales to *The New York Times*--vans that left the stores loaded with newly purchased copies of Susann's books. It all worked beautifully. Despite poor reviews, she was the first author to have three number-one bestsellers in a row, and she set the stage for the way big-time fiction is published and publicized today. According to Barbara Seaman, author of *Lovely Me: The Life of Jacqueline Susann*, the real secret of her success was motivation: Susann had a severely autistic son, and she needed the money to make sure he was well cared

for.

1972

The Big Payback

Clifford Irving made money (and lost it) the old fashioned way: He told a king-size lie

Author Clifford Irving set the publishing world on fire when he announced that he had written *The Autobiography of Howard Hughes* in cooperation with the book's subject, one of America's richest and most reclusive men. It was to have an enormous first printing of 400,000 copies, and the media soon jumped all over the story. In early 1972, during an episode of *60 Minutes*, Irving swore to a skeptical Mike Wallace that the book was authentic--but soon thought better of what was in reality a complete hoax, and admitted to as much. Problem was, he had already accepted a record-breaking \$765,000 advance check. Irving gave the money back, was named "Con Man of the Year" by *Time* and was eventually sentenced to prison.

1981

The Long Weekend

Most how-to authors never prove they can do it--whatever it is. But Robert Allen did

Allen is the author of a popular real estate guidebook titled *Nothing Down*, and he had so much confidence in his system that in 1981 he boasted he could buy a number of properties in any city given just seventy-two hours and \$100. The *Los Angeles Times* took him up on the dare, and he pulled it off with \$20 to spare. *Nothing Down* continued to sell well afterward and Allen went on to write a sequel, *Nothing Down for the '90s*.

1981

The Live Show

When it comes to the writing process, Harlan Ellison is willing to reveal everything

Science fiction legend Harlan Ellison has been obsessed with the idea of "live" writing for more than twenty-five years, ever since he heard about the time Belgian author Georges Simenon pulled a stunt by writing while sitting in a glass cage, much to the delight of Paris bystanders. Ellison eventually learned that the stop/was fabricated, but not before trying it himself. He's done it about thirty-five times now, sitting in various store windows while typing away, drawing crowds of onlookers and producing enough short stories in the process to fill an upcoming collection tentatively titled *Ellison Under Glass*. He has always insisted that he does his live writing without notes and without having thought of a story idea beforehand, and in 1981 he accepted a special challenge in order to prove it. Tom Brokaw, then the host of the NBC's *Today* show, presented Ellison with the first sentence of a nonexistent story as the author took his seat in the front window of a Brentano's store on Manhattan's Fifth Avenue. The stunt had been well-publicized, and a huge crowd had gathered in front of the window by the time Ellison arrived. He didn't disappoint. By the end of the day, he had finished the story, titled "Night of Black Glass," and he appeared on *Today* the very next morning for a triumphant interview with substitute anchor Jessica Savitch.

1982

The Hidden Keys

Thousands of dollars in jewels are waiting for anyone with an old copy of *The Secret*

In 1982, Bantam Books ran newspaper ads announcing a very interesting challenge. Twelve treasure chests had been buried all over the United States and Canada, and each contained a key that could be redeemed for a jewel that was already sitting in a safe-deposit box in a Manhattan bank. (Together, the twelve jewels were worth more than \$10,000--and those are 1982 dollars.) The whole thing was tied to the publication of *The Secret*, a now out-of-print book by Sean Kelly and Ted Mann that contained clues as to the chests' whereabouts. Only one was found, in Chicago. According to Byron Preiss, who arranged the contest, the other eleven are still hidden after twenty years and the remaining jewels are still sitting peacefully in the bank.

1990

The Town Store

Walter Swan found only one shop willing to stock his book. He knew the owner well

After writing *Me 'n' Henry*, a memoir based on a childhood spent in Arizona, Walter Swan decided he'd have to do what lots of small-time authors do when they can't get a book contract: self-publish. But like most self-published writers, he had a hard time convincing stores to stock the title--something that big, mainstream publishing companies usually have no trouble doing--and he was soon left with stacks of unsold copies. His solution to the problem was what put him on the map: He opened a shop called The One Book Bookstore right on Main Street in Bisbee, Arizona, and he stocked only one book: *Me 'n' Henry*. A few years later, after he'd written a few other books, Swan opened another store, right next door, so he could sell them, too. It was known as The Other Book Bookstore. Before his death in 1994, Swan had become a Bisbee institution, he'd appeared on David Letterman's show and his book eventually sold more than thirty thousand copies.

1996

The Secret Movie

Michael Moore's *Downsize This!* book tour wasn't what his publisher had in mind

Unbeknownst to Random House, bestselling author, filmmaker and working-class hero Michael Moore agreed to go on an extensive promotional tour for his book *Downsize This!* mostly because he thought it would be fun to make a movie along the way. What he wanted to do was produce a documentary that, like his book, exposed the ills of the working and recently laid-off poor--in this case, the poor who lived in the Midwestern cities where he happened to be signing books. What resulted was *The Big One*, a movie filled with exactly the sort of shenanigans for which Moore is well known. His crew filmed him giving inflammatory lectures and radio interviews, filmed him handing out homemade certificates of achievement to the companies that had laid off the most workers in each community he visited and even filmed him getting arrested. (One of his tour chaperones was almost arrested herself, after Moore told a store security guard that she was stalking him.)

2002

The Love Letter

Robert Epstein needs a total stranger, a girlfriend and a co-author--all in one

Last May, *Psychology Today* editor-in-chief Robert Epstein wrote an editorial announcing his

sincere attempt to answer a question that had been plaguing him: Why do people with arranged marriages--quite common outside the West--divorce less frequently than those couples who pair off after falling in love? Epstein proclaimed that he would find a woman, a total stranger, learn to love her and then collaborate with her on a book about the process. It was intended as a legitimate experiment, not a stunt, but newspapers picked up the story immediately, and Epstein was soon flooded with offers from TV producers looking for the next reality-show gimmick. The editor says he has received offers from more than a thousand women, and although he hasn't round the right candidate yet, the book deal--for what is tentatively titled *The Love You Make: How We Learned to Love Each Other, and How You Can, Too*--is still lined up. Watch for a future episode of CBS's *48 Hours* telling the story.

2002

The Magic Man

David Blaine lives for attention, but his latest attempt comes at a very high price

So-called street magician David Blaine may be a master of sleight-of-hand, but what he's really good at--usually--is causing a scene. He gathers a crowd whether he's standing on a street corner, frozen in a block of ice in Times Square or balancing atop a pole in New York's Bryant Park. His book *Mysterious Stranger*, released last Halloween, is a history of his craft--but it's also embedded with clues as to the whereabouts of a \$100,000 treasure. Brian McLendon, his publicist at Random House, says the office switchboard has been full of callers, one of whom is convinced the treasure is buried under the publisher's headquarters.

HYPE LITE: A few of our list's More interesting runners-up

KEEP ON TRUCKIN' Sometime in the '60s--she can't remember the exact date--Bantam Books publicist Esther Margolis had the idea to take a couple of young, attractive female authors out to personally meet the truck drivers who worked for Midwestern book distributors. (In those days, the drivers were responsible not only for loading and unloading new copies, but also for deciding how prominently they would be displayed inside the dime stores that sold them.) The scheme was a resounding success: Margolis, who was also Jacqueline Susann's publicist, rose through the ranks at Bantam and later went on to found her own publishing house, Newmarket Press.

ARE WE THERE YET? In 1987, journalist Tim Cahill and Garry Sowerby spent twenty-three days driving the length of the Pan-American Highway, from Tierra Del Fuego to Alaska. Sowerby, a professional driver, was hired by General Motors to make the trip as a publicity stunt for the new GMC Sierra, and Cahill documented the trip in the book *Road lever*.

ALTAR BOY In the summer of 1996, NBA star Dennis Rodman wrapped up his *Bad As I Wanna Be* book tour by arriving at the venue, a jam-packed Barnes & Noble in midtown New York, dressed in a bridal gown.

FOOLED Thrown in a SoHo art studio on the night before April Fools' Day, the 1998 launch party for Nat Tate, William Boyd's biography of a brilliant artist who had committed suicide, was swank and well-attended. David Bowie read from the book, and the guests--including New York celebs like Charlie Rose, Jay McInerney and Julian Schnabel--seemed appreciative. As it turns out, it was all a sham. Boyd, who had let Bowie in on the prank, had invented Tate altogether. Whether he meant it as an outright hoax or as a work of performance art is up for debate.

UNAPEELING Three years ago, Kenneth J. Harvey, author of the novel *Skin Hound: There Are No*

Words, grafted bits of his own skin onto pieces of paper used as promotional covers for a limited run of the book.

STREET PROPHET In 2000, Travis Hugh Culley, author of *The Immortal Class: Bike Messengers and the Cult of Human Power*, set up a free-advice booth at the base of the Wrigley Building on Michigan Avenue in Chicago. He soon had a long line of people with all sorts of questions, and he got written up in the *Chicago Sun-Times*.

DIRTY WORK To promote his 2001 book *Touching My Father's Soul*, Jamling Tenzing Norgay, the son of the Sherpa who led Sir Edmund Hillary to the summit of Mount Everest, got together with Miami Herald columnist Dave Barry and climbed Florida's most vertical surface: the South Dade Solid Waste Disposal Facility, locally known as Mount Trashmore.

TOILET HUMOR To publicize an appearance by the author, a bookstore in Portland, Maine, sent out pink urinal pucks with the opening lines of Brady Udall's *The Miracle Lire of Edgar Mint* printed on them. (The character Mint is an orphan whose security blanket is a urinal puck he stole from a hospital as a child.)

A SMALL OBSERVATION After the publication of his 2002 memoir, *How To Lose Friends and Alienate People*, journalist Toby Young appeared nude on the cover of *The New York Observer* with a copy of his book covering his private parts. After the paper hit newsstands, Young said he was a bit embarrassed that the image of the book wasn't all that large.

Wetzel, Eric

Source Citation (MLA 8th Edition)

Wetzel, Eric. "Book magazine proudly presents ... a brief history of the literary world's most attention-getting publicity stunts, most audacious hoaxes and most memorable tomfoolery." *Book*, Mar.-Apr. 2003, p. 60+. *Academic OneFile*, http://link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/A98415284/AONE?u=tel_a_vanderbilt&sid=AONE&xid=caa013b3. Accessed 8 Sept. 2018.

Gale Document Number: GALE|A98415284