

What's an Author To Do With No Blurb On the Book Jacket?; Newcomers Are Accustomed To Plugs, but Old-Timers Just Don't Have the Time

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Full Text (1313 words)

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Author Mat Johnson says only one thing prevented his novel, "Hunting in Harlem," from quickly fading into obscurity: Its cover carries a blurb from top-selling mystery writer Walter Mosley. "Everywhere I went, I heard that if Walter liked it, I'll like it," says Mr. Johnson.

Yet when Mr. Johnson is asked to provide blurbs himself -- and, because of his newfound fame, he gets a lot of galley requests now -- he usually says no. "I'd never get anything else done," says Mr. Johnson, whose novel was published in May. The best way to turn down a request, he adds, is to not return calls. People eventually get the hint.

Publishers have long counted on their best-selling authors to craft pithy words of praise to adorn the dust jackets of other writers. With an estimated 150,000 new titles published in 2002, and promotional dollars at a premium, a juicy blurb is considered essential for a fledgling author.

"In the battle to capture attention, it can make a difference," says Michael Pietsch, publisher of [AOL Time Warner Inc.](#)'s Little, Brown & Co.

But now some writers, including many who benefited from blurbs early in their own careers, are throwing up their hands and saying, "No more."

Rick Moody, author of "The Ice Storm" and other well-reviewed literary fiction, doesn't blurb because he worries that it will create "bad political situations" if he praises one friend's book but rejects another. He also prefers to pick his own bedside reading. "The liberty of reading is one of the things that made me want to be a writer in the first place," he says, via e-mail. Although two of his books have jacket blurbs, Mr. Moody says he has long told Little, Brown, which is his publisher, that he prefers his dust jackets to quote reviews of his earlier books.

Rising literary star Jonathan Lethem, whose novel "Motherless Brooklyn," was widely praised, is also out of the blurb business. Bill Thomas, Mr. Lethem's editor at Bertelsmann AG's Doubleday imprint, says he banned him from blurbing in hopes of speeding up delivery of his forthcoming novel, "The Fortress of Solitude." Mr. Lethem declined to comment through his publicist.

The ranks of writers who are unwilling to blurb, a group that editors, agents and publicists say appears to be growing, is roiling the publishing business and causing resentment among those who depend on such tributes to attract readers. It's churlish to say no, say some editors and agents, especially in an industry that is competing with movies, television and the Internet.

"It's so difficult to overcome obscurity and build a career that generosity to newcomers is important and essential," says Richard S. Pine, president of [Arthur Pine Associates Inc.](#), a literary agency. "The irony is that I'll bet you every single author who is no longer giving blurbs got them when they were starting out."

Such talk doesn't move best-selling author Jan Karon, who won't give blurbs. And she doesn't much care whether the publishing world thinks she's selfish. "I don't have time to read manuscripts, I've got to write my own," says Ms. Karon. Her next novel, "Shepherds Abiding," will be published in October with quotes from past reviews on the jacket. "I work my fanny off to do this series," she says. Ms. Karon's first book, "At Home in Mitford," carried a blurb by Dora Saint, who writes about the English countryside under the pseudonym Miss Read.

Evan Morris, who writes a newspaper column called "The Word Detective" that runs in the U.S. and Japan, traces the word blurb back to humorist Gelett Burgess. While

attending a meeting of the [American Booksellers Association](#) in 1907, Mr. Burgess created a fake dust jacket featuring a drawing of a gorgeous young woman named Blinda Blurb. "Originally, blurb meant hyperbolic jacket copy," says Mr. Morris. "At some point it became effusive quotations from somebody about the book."

The technique proved so popular that when Boni & Liveright published Ernest Hemingway's short-story collection "In Our Time" in the U.S. in 1925, the cover, front and back, was all blurbs. Writers who blurbed the book included John Dos Passos, Ford Madox Ford and Sherwood Anderson.

Today, blurbs are considered so powerful that some literary agents are going to publishers with blurbs in hand to help persuade editors to buy their books. "It can make a difference by showing that the author is a real go-getter," says Jeff Kleinman, an agent with Graybill & English Literary Agency in Washington. Mr. Kleinman most recently collected blurbs in hopes of boosting interest in author Cathie Pelletier's newest novel, which he is now shopping around.

Chris Bohjalian, whose novel "Midwives" hit the bestseller lists after it was touted by Oprah Winfrey in 1998, stopped blurbing books in 2000 because the onslaught of manuscripts left him too little time to work on his own stuff. Some colleagues, though, found his rejections hard to stomach. "I've been on panels with people who were cold to me because I wouldn't blurb their book," he says. "Their feelings were hurt, and rightly so."

Mr. Bohjalian has had a change of heart and says he will now provide a few blurbs a year -- preferably for books by people he doesn't know. His primary criterion, he says, is that a book be something he regards highly enough to encourage other people to read.

Authors who need blurbs often turn to their editors. But in some cases they get their own. Canadian Heather Pringle, author of the well-received "The Mummy Congress: Science, Obsession, and the Everlasting Dead," says she sent requests to writers she admired, including Evan S. Connell, author of the classic novel of suburban life, "Mrs. Bridge," and the late evolutionary biologist Stephen Jay Gould. Although Mr. Connell sent her a blurb, Mr. Gould never wrote back, she says. Now that she's working on her next book, however, Ms. Pringle says she doesn't have time to provide blurbs for others.

Mr. Bohjalian isn't the only writer to regret spurning a blurb request. Chuck Palahniuk, the author of "Fight Club," the 1996 book later made into a movie starring Brad Pitt, in May 2002 met aspiring author Amanda Stern in Barcelona. When Ms. Stern later needed a blurb for her forthcoming novel, "The Long Haul," she sent Mr. Palahniuk two letters and got no reply.

Then Ms. Stern spotted Mr. Palahniuk at a recent writer's conference in Oregon, and immediately confronted him. "He told me he never received my letters, but that even if he had, he wouldn't have given me a blurb because he doesn't have the time," recalls Ms. Stern. It took her six months to land the five blurbs that grace her book, including one from up-and-comer Victor LaValle. "It's the responsibility of the bigger authors to help hoist the voice of a younger author," she says.

Mr. Palahniuk, reached by phone, says the encounter was terribly embarrassing. Although he makes time for close friends or editors, he says he is overwhelmed with unsolicited manuscripts and galleys. "You wouldn't believe the pile that arrives," he says.

Do blurbs really sell books? Mr. Moody doesn't think so. "I only blurb for the dead," says Margaret Atwood, 63 years old, who stopped providing blurbs 10 years ago. "For publishers, it's like patent medicine: They think this will help their bunions." Ms. Atwood says that as a young writer she was glad to get blurbs. And later she helped out as many writers as she could.

"I got blurbs and I gave freely," says Ms. Atwood, whose latest novel, "Oryx and Crake," uses snippets of reviews of her earlier books. "But that was once upon a time. I'm too old now, and I read very slowly. Entering the market as a young writer is very hard these days. But I'm not God, a realization that has come to me late in life."