

# LOVE'S TENDER TITLE SHOCK

by Ralph Keyes

*"A good title is the title of a successful book."*

—Raymond Chandler

**S**OMETHING seemed amiss when my book's publicist told me she kept its title hidden when she took the book with her to our publisher's lunchroom. This title was "We, the Lonely People." "Well, I wouldn't want anyone to get the idea I'm one of the lonely people," she explained. The concern wasn't hers alone. The wincing, averted eyes and quick changing of subject which greeted "We, the Lonely People" during its short life left me with a lasting interest in titles.

What makes for a good book title?

"A good title," one repeatedly hears, "is a title that sells the book."

Seeking further guidance, I consulted a local wholesaler. This man carried a few hardbacks in addition to paperbacks and magazines. "Seagull," he replied to my inquiry about good titles. "Seagull, Seagull." He thumbed some catalogues on his desk impatiently, then cast them aside, muttering, "We need another 'Seagull.' That was a good title."

Recently, I tried again, asking Jeff Capshew, manager of Philadelphia's B. Dalton, about book titles. "A good title," he said, "is catchy and to the point." "Dress for Success" to Capshew is a classic. Or "The Joy of Sex." Or Bill Russell's "Second Wind." Or any of Stephen King's titles. "Broca's Brain," by contrast, Capshew thinks is confusing and may have hurt that book's sales.

Clarity and brevity are almost pure virtues in Capshew's universe—especially the latter. A good title is nearly al-

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*Ralph Keyes's book "The Height of Your Life" (Little, Brown), might have been called "The Height Report," but his editor promised to take the first case of books by that title and, after tying it around the author's neck, throw that case in the Charles River. "Titles are definitely an author's prerogative," says Keyes, "but editors' arguments can be persuasive."*

ways a short title because, as he points out, "People with a short attention span can catch on to it on a talk show. Also, the clerks catch on to it more easily."

The closer one gets to the cash register, the louder terseness rings as a virtue in titling. Among other advantages, a short title has fewer words people can get wrong.

During two and a half years at Dalton's Eatontown, New Jersey, branch, senior clerk Carl Budrecki has kept a list of his all-time favorite title requests. This list includes:

For "The Brethren": "Breathe" and "The Bathroom Is Cold,"

For "The Amityville Horror": "The Medieval Whore," "The Secret of Amaretto," "The Amnestyville Horror" and "The Andersonville Terror."

For various Erma Bombeck books: "If Life Is a Bowl of Cherries, Why Am I Spitting Out the Pits?" "The Post-Nasal Drip Depression" and "The Copy Book."

And for miscellaneous others: "The French Woman's Room," "Bury My Heart Near My Wounded Knee," "Cheapskate" (by Michener) and "Harold Robbins and The Blue Cowgirls."

It may have been a coincidence, but the paperbacks displayed by my checkout line at Dalton's averaged 1.6 words per title ("Birdy," "Nurse," "Wifey," "Mommie Dearest," "Good as Gold"). The ones by my supermarket line the next day averaged 1.8 ("Birdy," "Pendulum," "The Snake," "The Stand," "The Valdez Marriage"). In the face of such evidence, that title inspiration you had the night before—the clever one 12 words long, but what the hell, look at Erma Bombeck's—quickly loses luster. Talking with clerks, distributors and sales reps can do in an inspired title together (unless your *name* is Erma Bombeck, in which case it hardly matters).

A former sales rep once told me that he considered titles *per se* 33% of his sales package. A good one helped him to that degree, and a bad one hurt. Many would quibble with that percentage ("I'd be interested in what titles he was selling," comments Little, Brown's Roger Donald). But no one doubts the appeal of a good title. From author to buy-

er, it jingles pleasantly all along the publishing chain. Reviewers comment favorably on appropriate titles, and criticize ones that aren't. Reprints say a good title can be their best handle. Booksellers respond to titles that stand out. So do publishers.

"The more a title interests me," says Doubleday publicity manager Reid Boates, "the easier it is for me to get other people interested." Boates cites "The Managerial Woman" as such a title, one that not only motivated him to take a copy of the manuscript right home to read, but that also announced itself accurately as nonfiction, fairly serious and a bit out of the ordinary. Boates currently likes "Unfinished Business," the title of a book on pressure points in women's lives, and one he hopes will catch on in the vein of "Catch-22" or "Future Shock."

If two words ever helped to sell a book, they were "Future Shock." After buying reprint rights, Oscar Dystel, then president of Bantam, admitted that he himself was sold in part by Alvin Toffler's title. "We react to titles," Dystel told Gerald Walker at the time. "I have to confess. If it had been called 'The Future of the World,' I don't know if we'd have been interested."

"Future Shock" (a phrase Toffler coined for a magazine article six years before his book was published) is one of those envied titles which leap right off a jacket and into the national conversation. Today's leading candidate for such immortality is "The Right Stuff." But Tom Wolfe's latest title seems unlikely to make it into the language, certainly not with the force of his past coinings such as "Radical Chic" or "The 'Me' Decade." "The Right Stuff" is just a shade too self-conscious, a touch too calculated to live on past its parent.

Can enduring title-phrases be deliberately coined? The record argues against it. "Catch-22" would have been "Catch-18" had not "Mila 18" forced Joseph Heller to change numbers at the behest of his editor, Robert Gottlieb. Toffler's follow-up to "Future Shock"—"The Eco-Spasm Report"—is as forgettable as its predecessor was memorable.

Then there's the case of David Halberstam. "The Best

and the Brightest" had genius as a title. Without a catchy word in the lot, the cadence worked, and the mood. After it appeared on his book, Halberstam's title seemed just on the tip of our tongues. Its successor is another story altogether. Even if former Philadelphia mayor Frank Rizzo did complain recently about "the powers that be that can destroy people," Halberstam's latest title seems unlikely to linger in the language. And if it does, whom should we credit? At the time Knopf announced "The Powers That Be," two books by that title were already listed in Books in Print. Now there are four, because shortly before Halberstam's book came out, G. William Domhoff's "Powers That Be: Process of Ruling Class Domination in America" was published by Vintage—like Knopf, a Random House imprint. Domhoff says that when Halberstam's editor asked him through his editor if he would consider changing his title, he saw no reason to do so. Although he feels the title represents his book better than it does Halberstam's, Domhoff is philosophical about having to share. "Ultimately it made no difference," he says. "It hasn't hurt his sales, or helped mine."

## Rooting Innuendo Out

Originality, obviously, is somewhat below the top of the list of titling priorities. This doesn't mean that people who conjure titles aren't aware of the danger of repetition. More than one editor polled for this article mentioned having an inspired idea for a title only to find it already in Books in Print, or on someone else's forthcoming list. In some cases the repetition is multiple. Books in Print currently includes "Legacy" seven times, two "Betrayal"s, three "Betrayed"s, three "Betrayers"s, and eight "Stranger"s. Undaunted, Doubleday has upcoming a novel called "The Stranger" which used to be called "The Fourth Man" until a work of nonfiction usurped that title.

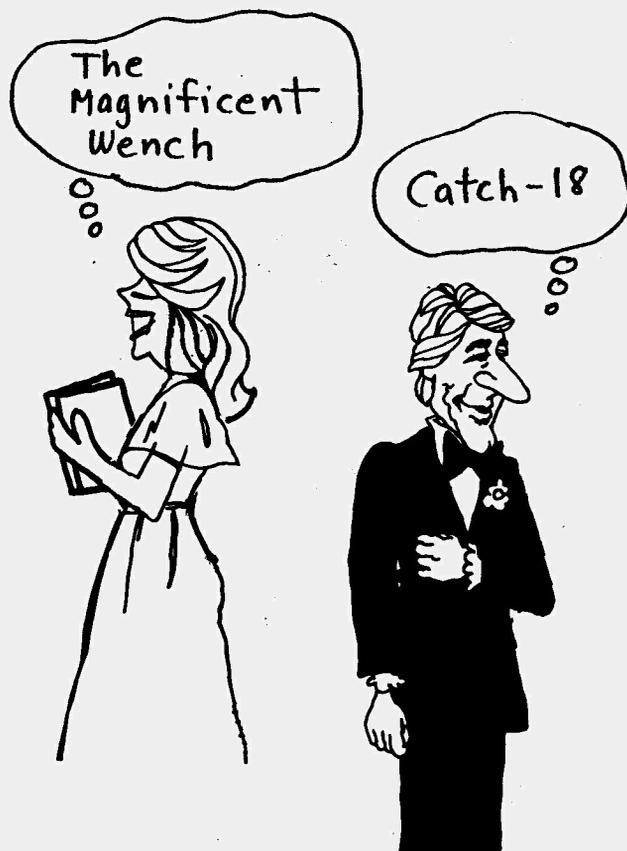
The reasons for changing a title can be rather varied. Stephen King says he reluctantly went from "The Shine" to "The Shining" when it was suggested to him that the former might be thought to have racial overtones. "Salem's Lot," adds King, would have been "The Second Coming" had not his publisher detected sexual innuendo in the latter.

Raymond Chandler's "The High Window" began life as "The Brasher Doubloon." Its change was due to concern on the part of his editor, Blanche Knopf, that booksellers might pronounce the middle word "brassiere." (Perhaps seeing this danger as a virtue, the moviemakers adapting Chandler's novel reverted to its original title.)

Chandler's struggles with Knopf over titles were so routine that while working on "The Lady in the Lake," he wrote her a letter saying that he was "trying to think up a good title for you to want me to change." According to biographer Frank McShane, the novelist agonized over each of his classic titles, and devoted considerable thought to what makes for a good one. It should "make itself remembered," Chandler once wrote of such a title. "It should convey an idea with some emotional tinge. It should be provocative but not strained. It should, if possible, have a haunting quality."

Although helpful as far as they go, such observations are of little tangible use to the would-be titler. Yet they're about as tangible as observations get in this field. "A good title," says executive editor Maureen Baron of Fawcett/Gold Medal, "is one that gives you that 'Yeah!' feeling."

Baron speaks with authority. She is the originator of "Love's Tender Fury"—the most imitated title in recent memory. "I used the title once, and I've hated it ever since," says the editor today. As she recalls its origin, those three words came to her in an inspired moment while she was compiling lists of alternative titles for a historical romance then called "The Magnificent Wench." Although she had no objection to the original title, there was some





feeling around Warner (where she was an editor at the time) that the term "wench" might be confusing in the marketplace. Nor was "Love's Tender Fury" an instant hit when first suggested by Baron. Many thought the title too "poetic." But, convinced of its value, Baron resorted to a tactic of submitting list after list of new title possibilities with only "Love's Tender Fury" recurring. The rest is history.

"There are two schools of thought about titling," says Warner's copy chief, senior editor Fredda Isaacson, who collaborated on "Love's Tender Fury." "Either you offer only one as an inspiration. Or you produce lists, long lists, in which you keep repeating your favorite. A variation is to offer only your favorite and two dogs."

When it comes to basic titling procedures, there is surprisingly little variation from one publisher to another. Original paperback titlers do have more need to get to the point in their cover-to-cover competition; no "Hanta Yo's" for them (they say a bit enviously). As a result, paperback editors are more prone to impose a title on an author, being somewhere between magazine and hardback editors in this regard.

Hardback editors more often are forced to maneuver political rapids between author and seller and back again. Ideally a manuscript comes in with a "Yeah!" title which is pleasing to author, editor, publicists, advertising staff, sales reps, booksellers and, it is hoped, buyers. Rarely is this the case. Editor then consults with author on alternatives. With luck, they come right up with a good new title. This failing, other editors are invited to make suggestions, as are people in marketing. "We sort of throw it out to the house," explains a Random House editor. ("All the President's Men" resulted from an actual in-house contest at Simon & Schuster which was won by then marketing director Dan Green.) If it remains unresolved, a titling problem is raised at sales conferences and suggestions are invited. Mail clerks are polled. Agents intervene. Authors murmur anxiously at home, and awake in the night to scribble words on matchbook covers.

This process needn't be unpleasant. "Some people love crossword puzzles," says Doubleday vice-president Stew-

art Richardson. "I enjoy thinking up titles."

Senior editor Roger Donald of Little, Brown doesn't. "I think I'm the world's worst titler," says Donald. "Better titles come from the ad department, sales, my wife, children, friends—everyone but my dog." But Donald's problem is alleviated by having authors such as Norman Mailer and William Manchester who are both good at coming up with their own titles, and not shy about insisting upon them. "American Caesar," the editor says, is a title William Manchester stood firmly behind despite some in-house feeling that "Douglas MacArthur" ought to be in there somewhere. (Among the first letters Donald got in response to a blurb request was from a historian complimenting him on the book's title.)

Particularly when their names sell books, authors can and do resist pressure to change titles. Having regularly revised titles at his publishers' suggestion, Stephen King says he finally decided to dig in his heels on "The Dead Zone." Many at Viking found that title too "down," says King, too negative—possibly about cancer. He thought the title represented his novel perfectly, and had a nice, edgy quality. When the *New York Times's* Christopher Lehmann-Haupt reviewed this book title favorably, its author made sure everyone who had fought it got copies of the review. "But if it had been three or four books earlier," says King, "if I had been less well established, I might have gone along and changed the title."

Perhaps confident of clout to come, Pat Conroy insisted on "The Water Is Wide" for his first novel, despite the reservations of his agent, among others. Only after he began getting letters addressed to "The author of 'How Wide Is My River' [or] 'The Water Is Wine'" would Conroy admit his mistake. "'The Water Is Wet' is the one that really did me in," he explains.

"Conrack!"—the title of the movie based on his book—is probably an improvement, concedes Conroy today. But "The Ace"—the title under which Orion is about to release a movie based on his novel "The Great Santini"—Conroy calls "a total humiliation.

"It's a title I despise," he says, "but they did market research, and that's what they came up with.

"I still like my title better, even if people did think it was for a book about the circus. But it irritates me that I may be killing off every book I write by my title. I'm terrible on titles. I break out in hives trying to come up with them."

### Inventive Authors' Ploys

Title nerves can cause a special anxiety among authors. The thought that years of work and thousands of words of text could be sabotaged by the poor choice of a few on the jacket is, to say the least, alarming. Anxiety leads to lists. Even Erma Bombeck, says her agent, Aaron Priest, went through dozens of possibilities and hours of discussion involving him and her editor before settling on "Aunt Erma's Cope Book" and "If Life Is Just a Bowl of Cherries, What Am I Doing in The Pits?" For some reason, adds Priest, "The Grass Is Always Greener Over The Septic Tank" came easier to Bombeck than the other two.

To cope with title jitters, some authors grow inventive. Peggy Anderson, for example, threw a party to get suggestions from friends for the book that became "Nurse." After publishing a nonfiction children's book ("Once Upon a Question!"; Bantam), Warren Siegmund recently advertised a contest to title a novel he's written. Those responding with a stamped, self-addressed envelope get a synopsis of Siegmund's novel and 25 possible titles. Contestants are to choose and defend five favorites. The winner is promised a Selectric typewriter. Siegmund figures that if he gets a successful title by this means, it will be cheap at the price. He's hopeful also of getting a publisher.

Although this could be the most elaborate title search ever conducted by an author, others poll more casually and

heed the results. Through informal polling, Robert Ludlum discovered that "The Wolfsschanze Covenant" was hard to pronounce, and made a late switch to "The Holcroft Covenant." Similarly, Paul Zindel found by asking schoolchildren that "The Mortician's Gone Berserk" posed problems because few of them knew what a mortician was. Hence: "The Undertaker's Gone Bananas."

After my own tiling fiasco, I developed a primitive little testing method. This involves simply mentioning title candidates to friends and others, then ignoring what their mouths say (usually, "Oh, that's a nice title") while paying close attention to their eyes. For a book on high school memories I preferred "In the Hallways of Your Mind." But rarely did an eye flicker when I suggested this title. "Well, what's it about?" was the usual response. In despair I finally blurted, "You know, it's about 'Is there life after high school?'" At this, eyes began to flutter. Also cheeks flushed and mouths giggled as rusted wheels of memory began whining inside. Seeing that response so regularly left no alternative to what quickly became my title—"Is There Life After High School?"—a title unoriginal, banal, overlong and so successful I despair of ever matching it. The title works.

### What About Testing?

The value of such informal polling leads to the question of whether more formal testing of book titles might have value as well. Some paperback covers have been so tested, as has price resistance. And Grey Advertising recently conducted a full-fledged market study to determine the best name for Fawcett's new Regency romance imprint, concluding that potential buyers preferred "Coventry" to "Cotillion," "Sovereign," "Clarion" or "Regent Court" (*PW*, Sept. 3, 1979).

As for individual titles, testing seems to be limited to books ordered by mail. Publishing consultant William Kelty reports as much as a 15% difference in mail orders for Smithsonian books he's offered to two sets of customers using copy that is identical in every respect except for the title. Kelty says "A Zoo for All Seasons" recently bested "Animals Alive!" by that margin in comparative samples of 20,000; and by a somewhat lower percentage "The New Naturalists" lost out to "The Magnificent Foragers."

So far as I can discover, individual trade titles are not formally pretested. Nor can I detect any enthusiasm at the prospect. The very term "market testing" is a fingernail across the blackboard of publishing sensibilities. "Toothpaste" is the most common word association here—as in, "We're not selling toothpaste, you know" ("or deodorant," adds one editor).

Nor is title research a rallying cry among authors. "Books are getting too much like Toyotas already," objects Pat Conroy. And despite his disdain overall for hardback marketing strategies ("They feel their way; their antennae quiver"), Stephen King thinks titles are an author's prerogative, not to be researched like a brand of cereal.

But a form of title research is already being done in trade publishing. It's just primitive research with a skewed sample called "asking around the house." Somehow this phrase always suggests Jimmy Carter popping in on Hamilton Jordan to inquire about the state of the union. Like the White House, publishing houses risk becoming self-nourishing information loops. Titles that "work" in such a setting may flop in bookstores. Or vice versa. Without imitating Colgate, might it be possible to invite a few more people into the conversation about titles? Some newspapers, for example, convene regular meetings of a representative readership sample to discuss political and other issues. There is no reason a similar group of representative book-buyers couldn't at least help head off clunkers. Are titles under consideration clear? Representative? Tempting? Off-putting in any way?



I think any author (to say nothing of any publisher) would rather discover such strengths or weaknesses before a title were set in type.

In small print on the cover of the Signet edition of Rose Kushner's "Why Me?" are the words "Originally Titled 'Breast Cancer!'" In an introduction Kushner explains this change from the hardback title (actually a reversion to her original choice). Soon after "Breast Cancer" went on sale, a TV talk-show hostess told Kushner that she would never have read the book had she not been assigned to; a newspaper reporter mentioned putting a different jacket on it so he could read it on the subway; and a bookstore clerk told the author about several customers who had asked her to bag the book and take it to the cash register for them so they wouldn't have to risk being seen with "Breast Cancer" in hand.

Understandably, Kushner is among the authors more sympathetic to the idea of title research. "Hell, no," she responded when asked if she'd object to pretesting of a future title. "I'd welcome it!"

I guess one's attitude toward title testing has partly to do with one's most recent title experience. With a new title about to undergo its first and last test—in the marketplace—I'm feeling partial to the idea. While liking this one ("The Height of Your Life," a deliberately ambiguous heading for a book on the touchy topic of physical height), I wonder. Will it be shelved under "Inspirational?" Is "Your" too '70s a concept? Will five words in my title keep me far from Dalton's cash register? Are they easy to forget? (Not until correcting "Height" page proofs did I catch myself misremembering "What Really Happened to the Class of '65" as "Whatever Happened to . . ."—as did Richard Reeves recently in the *New York Times Book Review*.)

It was encouraging when, unprompted, an editor I polled for this article mentioned having heard of "The Height of Your Life." I told her how comforting this felt.

"Well, sure," she continued. "I remember your last book too—you know, 'Whatever Happened to Life After High School?'" □