

What Makes a Good Book Title?

by RALPH KEYES

“A good title should make itself remembered. . . . It should have a haunting quality.”

“A good title,” one repeatedly hears, “is a title that sells a 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 always 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.”

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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.

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 twelve words long — quickly loses luster. Talking with clerks, distributors and sales reps can do in an inspired title altogether.

A former sales rep once told me that he considered titles *per se* 33% of his sales package. Many would quibble with that percentage, but no one doubts the appeal of a good title. From author to buyer, it jingles pleasantly all along the publishing chain. Reviewers comment favorably on appropriate titles and criticize ones that aren’t. Booksellers respond to titles that stand out. So do publishers.

“The more a title interests me,” says Doubleday publicity manager Reid Boates,

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"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.

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 said. "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. Tom Wolfe's latest title, *The Right Stuff*, 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.

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.

Originality 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*, three *Betrayer*'s, and eight *Stranger*'s. Undaunted, Doubleday has 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 Knopf a letter saying that he was "trying to think up a good title for you to want me to change." According to biographer Frank MacShane, 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."

"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 has no objection to the original title, there was some feeling that the term "wench" might be confusing in the marketplace. Nor was *Love's Tender Fury* an instant hit when first suggested. 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.

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.

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. Even Erma Bombeck, says her agent, went through dozens of possibilities and hours of discussion involving him and her editors 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, *The Grass Is Always Greener Over The Septic Tank* came easier to Bombeck than the other two.

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*.

I have 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 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. □

