

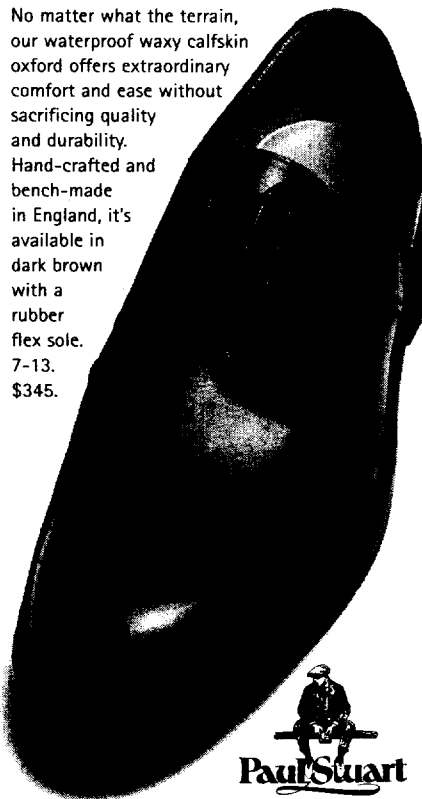
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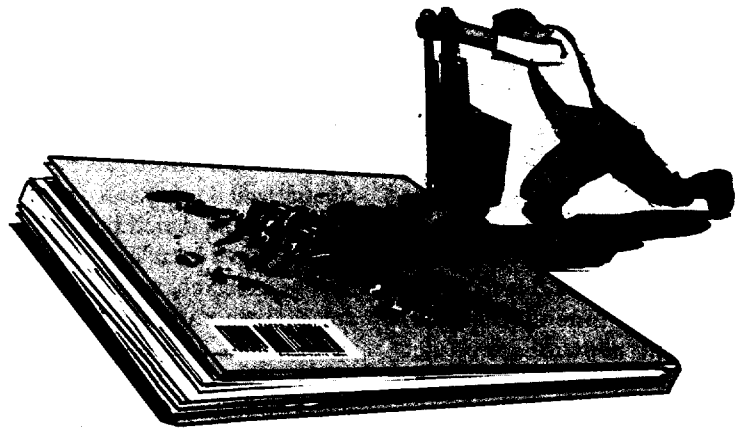
## BLURBS 101

BY KEVIN JACKSON

**P**HILISTINES tend to assume that the art of writing book-jacket blurbs is no art at all. Why, they sneer, a child of five could do it, if you gave the kid a list of suitable adjectives ("Tarnished superlatives," as Christo-

last is a more promising try, what with the superlative and the italics and the exclamation mark, but she nevertheless manages to fumble the ball.

To take a more contemporary example, the reclusive English writer J. H. Prynne,



pher Isherwood once called them) and a regular reviewing gig. But the book blurb is a minor literary form every bit as exacting and disciplined as the cinquain, the villanelle, or the Petrarchan sonnet. Many illustrious authors have attempted it and failed. Just as Herman Melville never penned a catchy poem, so Samuel Beckett was a hopeless amateur when it came to coughing up a bit of Advance Praise. When he was asked to provide a blurb for the young experimental novelist B. S. Johnson, Beckett could manage nothing snappier than "I regard him as a most gifted writer and deserving of far more attention than he has received up to now."

That's it. Not so much as a "shatteringly original." Still, compare Beckett's blurbs to some that eminent poets have come up with, and he starts to look like Saatchi & Saatchi. Marianne Moore provided so many blurbs for her friends that an entire section of her "Complete Prose" is given over to the form, but it's hard to believe that recipients of her praise would have flushed to their roots with pleasure. Here is Miss Moore on John Ashbery: "I find him prepossessing." And on Kenneth Burke: "To begin with, a poet. His absence of affectation is one of the rarest things on earth. 'Towards a Better Life' is a book to annotate. Un-stodgy *be!*" This

who is regarded by a group of avant-garde intellectuals as the most important British poet of the last half-century (or, to put it another way, "the most important British poet of the last half-century"—*The New Yorker*), was somehow tempted to provide a puff for Iain Sinclair's novel "Downriver." The result: "A powerful beast fable that runs tapping and casting in violent seduction of the cuticle."

Plainly, literary talent alone is not enough to make a first-rate blurbist—sombre news for the rising man or woman of letters who is hoping to join the immortals by riding on someone else's back cover. But there are a few reliable tricks of the trade that can be easily assimilated in an hour or so. If Beckett had known them, he might not have made such a sorry spectacle of his incompetence. Those of us in the racket call them the Seven Habits of Highly Successful Blurbing.

1—GUSH. As with other forms of flattery, you cannot possibly pile the praise on too thickly. "The best book ever written by man or woman. . . . Deserves to sell more copies than the Bible." Now, that's more like it. No matter that it's obviously a trifle tongue-in-cheek; this verdict from the magazine *Rebel Inc.* on Irvine Welsh's scabrous saga of Edinburgh junkies, "Trainspotting,"

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now a Major Motion Picture, duly achieved the condition to which all blurbs should aspire, and was emblazoned in large letters across the book's front cover.

A closer look at the etymology of "blurb" reveals that gushing is implicit in the meaning of the word. "Blurb" was coined in 1907 by the humorist Gelett Burgess, of the "Purple Cow" rhyme. In his dictionary of invented words, "Burgess Unabridged," Burgess defined a blurb as "1. A flamboyant advertisement; an inspired testimonial. 2. Fulsome praise. . . . On the 'jacket' of the 'latest' fiction, we find the blurb; abounding in agile adjectives and adverbs, attesting that this book is the 'sensation of the year.'" Most of Burgess's spoof neologisms never made it off the pages of his dictionary, but "blurb"—and his usage of "bromide," in the nonchemical sense of "platitude"—evidently answered an unmet need in the century of Hype, and rapidly passed into common currency.

### 2—OBSERVE THE RULE OF THREE.

A young anthropologist-turned-marketing-executive once explained to me that, in just about every culture she could think of, the number three represents infinity, and it is true that a skilled blurb artist will naturally gravitate toward verbal triads, in accordance with the idea that three nouns or, better still, three adjectives—"advanced, forthright, significant"—can exhaust the whole universe. It took me less than a minute of nosing around my local bookstore to locate these current examples: "Funny, sad, scary" (John Grisham, on Donna Tartt's "The Secret History"); "Enigmatic, obsessive, fascinating" (The Boston Review, on W. G. Sebald's "The Rings of Saturn"); "Elegant, thoughtful and wide-ranging" (the Miami Herald, on Mario Vargas Llosa's "Making Waves"). Enough, sufficient, plenty. Students wishing to proceed to advanced blurbing might steep themselves in the mature poetry of Robert Lowell, who was a grand master of the triple adjective—"loving, rapid, merciless"—and should also bear in mind the importance of adhering to the triadic principle when following our next rule:

3—MAKE COMPARISONS WITH OTHER LEADING BRAND NAMES. Exhibit A is the paperback edition of Bill Bryson's "A Walk in the Woods"; or, more precisely, its back cover. "Bryson is . . . great company right from the start—a lumbering, droll, neatnik intellectual who

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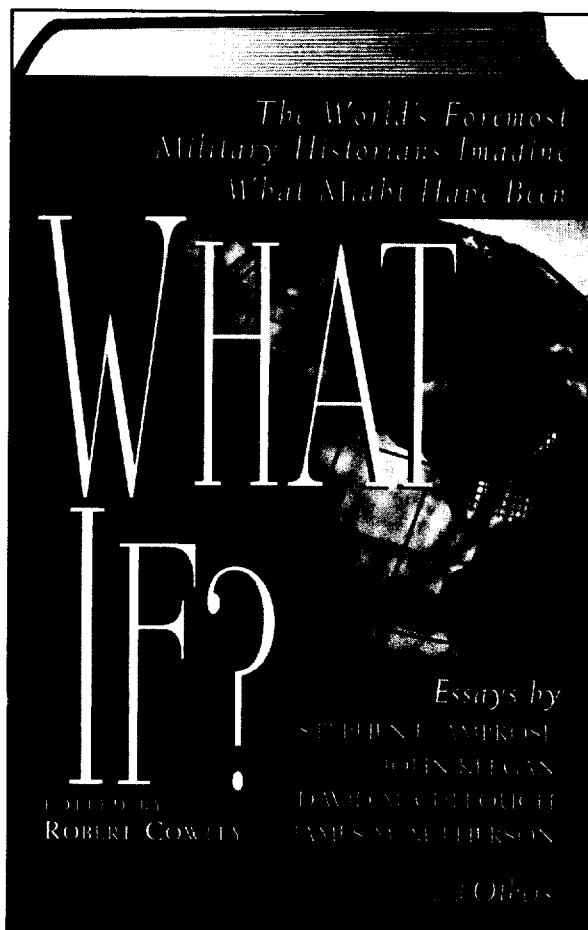
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comes off as equal parts Garrison Keillor, Michael Kinsley and . . . Dave Barry"—the *Times Book Review*. Beautifully done: observe the elegant symmetry of treble adjective with treble name-check, the friskiness of "neatnik," the faint but distinct whiff of a more learned age in "droll." (The *Washington Post Book World*, by way of dismal contrast, judged Bryson's work "choke-on-your-coffee funny," which strikes me as yawn-in-your-soup dull.) Let's just set it beside Exhibit B, which, not altogether by chance, is from the desk of Stephen King.

Mr. King is, as has often been noted, exceptionally generous in providing book-jacket endorsements, and sure enough, almost the first words to meet my eye in the bookshop were his. They graced the front cover of Tess Gerritsen's "Gravity": "She is better than Palmer, better than Cook . . . yes, even better than Crichton." (One, two, three. Excellent.) High praise, evidently, though King's comparisons were squandered on this particular browser: Crichton I recognize, Cook I think I recognize, but the only Palmers I can recall offhand are a nineteenth-century English landscape painter and a sometime golf champion. Still, as one would expect of the blurbmeister's blurbmeister, King is following another perfectly sound principle:

4—KNOW YOUR BROWSER. Which is to say, there's no point in invoking Wilkie Collins if you're thumping the tub for Jackie Collins. Brand comparisons should be offered as a guarantee of quality to connoisseurs of a genre; although I was ignorant enough to be left cold by King's words, no doubt legions of Whoosis Palmer fans would be goaded into stumping up for Gerritsen's novel. The *Times Book Review*'s triple invocation of Garrison Keillor, Michael Kinsley, and Dave Barry certainly seemed just, as well. I had to admire the economy with which the blurb steered "A Walk in the Woods" toward aficionados of good-natured jokiness and away from those who might have taken it for an updated version of "Walden."

5—TRY TO BE MILDLY IDIOSYNCRATIC. Anyone who stubbornly maintains that blurbs belong to the history of publicity rather than the history of literature should reflect on the fact that one of the most exquisite gems of the form was the work of the Marxist Chilean poet Pablo Neruda. On the back cover of Julio Cortázar's collection of essays

"Around the Day in Eighty Worlds," you will find the single line "Anyone who doesn't read Cortázar is doomed." Only genius could enable you to come up with something like that. With a little effort, though, you can season your plaudits with a mildly unexpected word or two—like "neatnik"—that will show you are a cut above the unimaginative dolts who just say "Read it and die laughing" (the *Daily News* on Barry, op. cit.). Jokes can be nice, but beware: you have to be Steve Martin to get away with "I laughed, I cried, and then I read the book" (on Eric Idle's "The Road to Mars"). Far better to play safe by adhering to the next rule:

6—MAKE APPPOSITE PUNS. Almost childishly simple, this: consider the subject matter or title of the book under review, think of a praise word that chimes with it (e.g., "Pale Fire"—"Blazingly brilliant . . . a furnace of invention"; or "The Ice Storm"—"Glacial genius, frosty wit . . . chilling"), and your work is done. Outsiders might think that this gimmick is now so well worn as to have fallen into disrepute. Not at all: according to *Newsweek*, "Lorrie Moore soars with 'Birds of America,'" and *Entertainment Weekly* considered "The Perfect Storm" "guaranteed to blow readers away." You can take it from there.

7—LEARN FROM THE MASTER. Such, then, are the rudiments of the blurber's craft. A final hint, however. Students who wish to devote their lives to mastering their art could do worse than acquaint or reacquaint themselves with the great-grandfather of all blurbers, Mr. Puff, in Sheridan's comedy "The Critic." The play contains a brilliant taxonomy of the various species of puff, which anticipates the varieties of modern blurbery with astonishing accuracy; included on Sheridan's list are "the Puff collateral," "the Puff collusive," and "the Puff oblique, or Puff by implication." Most useful, however, is "the Puff direct," Mr. Puff's all-purpose account of the reception of a friend's play before it was ever performed: "Characters strongly drawn—highly colored—hand of a master—fund of genuine humor—mine of invention—neat dialogue—attic salt!" Though Sheridan's play is almost as old as the United States, it is every bit as lively. In fact, I would go so far as to say that "The Critic" is an urgent, thrilling, towering masterpiece. . . . I urge you to read it. ♦