

It's spellbinding! Riveting! A triumphant tour de force!



Simon & Schuster is cutting back on book blurbs. Good

Books are about to become a little less “Spellbinding!”, “Stunning!” and “Compelling!”. Fewer still will offer a “tour de force” (whatever one of those might be). That is because Simon & Schuster, an American publisher, has decided to stop doing book blurbs, those saccharine quotes from other authors on the back of books, at its flagship imprint. They are, says Sean Manning, the company’s publisher, “very weird”.

Few will mourn them. The blurb (which in Britain is also called a “puff”) is an unloved literary tradition. It first appeared at the start of the 18th century and spread as printing presses perfected the modern dust jacket. The aim was to offer enthusiasm; instead, they were sometimes seen as suspect. Some authors scorned them; readers disregarded them. Blurbs are “disgusting tripe”, wrote George Orwell, in the sort of phrase that rarely makes it onto a cover.

Their tone is part of their problem. Blurbs are intended to be alluring. But their tenor of universal acclamation means that more often they are suspected of simply lying. “Right from the word go, people are suspicious,” says Ross Wilson, a professor of English at the University of Cambridge. With good reason, since blurbs are not quotes culled from impartial reviews but praise prised from writers (some of whom share the author’s agent or publisher). Look up the words “blurb” and “puff” in the dictionary, and definitions of both explain that their praise is extravagant.

Blurbs mislead readers in two ways. One is by exaggeration. The style of a puff is, as the name suggests, breathless. Someone might declare a book “magisterial”, another that it is “unputdownable”, a third that “If you can read this book and not shriek with delight, your soul is dead.” You feel guilty, wrote Orwell, when you are in the library and “fail to shriek with delight”.

Blurbs also lie by omission. In theory they are testament to an author’s narrative skills. In truth they are a testament to their social ones: they often reflect arm-twisting rather than artistry. Established authors loathe giving them. “We would as soon sell our tears for lemon-drops”, wrote Nathaniel Parker Willis, a poet, than thus “defile one of God’s truthful adjectives”. New authors struggle to get blurbs, which is partly why Simon & Schuster is ditching them.

Blurbs are also self-defeating. Intended to extol very good writing, they more often exemplify the very bad kind. Many are less written than assembled from stock phrases—“A heartbreaking, unputdownable page-turner!”—with an exclamation mark at the end. This makes them exhausting to read! And all but meaningless. There has been honest copy on dust jackets—T.S. Eliot’s description of Louis MacNeice, a fellow poet, informed readers that “His work is intelligible but unpopular”—but it is too rare.

It turns out that the habit of using words like “unputdownable” is itself quite putdownable. Mr Manning says his editors will use the time they save on chasing quotes to instead produce good books. Not, note, “scintillating” or “heart-rending” books but simply “the best books possible”. It is an admirably muted aim.

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