

A Luddite's Virtual Book Tour

Get on Facebook, make a video, e-blast everyone you know

JUST BEFORE MY LATEST BOOK, *HOME GIRL*, CAME OUT IN JUNE 2008, THE Random House promotion team invited me in to discuss strategy. There, in an office reassuringly lined with blockbusters, we covered the usual terrain. Did I have contacts at television networks? Know any reviewers at the *Los Angeles Times*? We went over a list of who might blurb.

Then the marketing lady asked about my friends. I sheepishly admitted that I didn't have many intimates, maybe ten or so on my A List. But no, I had misunderstood. She meant friends as in Facebook. How many did I have?

"I'm nearly fifty," I sputtered. "I don't do Facebook."

"Get on," she counseled. "There's no book tour."

Unlike the old days, an appearance on the *Today Show* is no longer enough. If I wanted this book to become a best-seller—or just sell, for God's sake—we had to create online buzz. I should e-blast every acquaintance since childhood to drum up word-of-mouth. Random House also wanted an author Web site and blogs. Because the book straddled various genres—it is a funny memoir about our street in Harlem when it was a narcotics bazaar—we would hit the blogosphere from real estate to politics. The marketing lady produced a list of fifty-one sites to bombard, along with the traditional media.

But wait. There was more. We also needed a video trailer that would give a virtual tour of the house and characters featured in the book. "You must get Salami," the marketing lady said. Salami is a manic crack addict who spends much of the book threatening to invade my house. His antics, such as doing chin-ups on traffic lights, might attract readers. We would post the video on YouTube.

"Wow," I gushed. "You do all that?"

The woman eyed me, puzzled. "No. You do."

Thus was I jolted into the cyber age. Until the book, I had resisted any attempt to go digital, beyond the odd e-mail. I was raised on typewriters, sent my first foreign dispatch by Telex, and hell if I was going to stop editing by pen. My first-grader son sent text messages for me. I thought a "stream" had water and "viral" meant AIDS.

I fondly recalled the day, only a decade ago, when I published my first book, *Fragments of a Forgotten War*. Back then, people still asked if you had e-mail. The antediluvian promotion by Penguin involved actual face-to-face interviews. I gave readings in brick and mortar bookstores and was profiled in publications that used actual paper. What was all this nonsense about Internet celebrity?

Yet, I did want to sell this book. I was aware that newspapers were closing or shedding book sections. And so I enlisted my six-year-old son Anton to help set up my profile. He got me on Facebook, and then for good measure on Plaxo, Hi5, LinkedIn, Shelfari, Goodreads, Amazon.com, and the Harvard Alumni Association. (Anton urged me to join a Yu-Gi-Oh! chat room, but even I knew that was not the right demographic.)

Once I signed up, things didn't look that bad. I reconnected with people I hadn't seen since college—people who still liked to read books. Heartened by this brush with the twenty-first century, I found a young woman to design the Web site. My idea—author photo and text—was deemed "too 2007." She assured me that she could whip up something cutting edge in a week, and flipped through her Mac to show me sites where images danced and sang. Then she mentioned XHTML.

Me: What's that?

Her: It's like Hyper Text Markup Language—same expressive range, plus it conforms to XML syntax, a more restrictive subset of SGML.

Me: Right.

The video was more straightforward. A friend of the Web maven knew something about cameras and we rounded up the book's various characters to star. They all enjoyed their Warholian moments. Despite a bad hair day, the local matriarch agreed to hold forth. My son proclaimed me nuts on camera. Salami was especially keen—he showed up days in advance to get my advice on what to wear. (He was also confused about the nature of the video, muttering: "You tell Hollywood that Denzel Washington should play me.") Another crack addict—a literary fellow who likes to borrow books from us—recited an impressive stream of Latin, then got stage fright and hastily excused himself, mumbling something about a blocked toilet. My aged mother drove in from Queens to demonstrate her formidable parking skills, terrorizing the local drug thugs in the process.

But the filmmaker ultimately decided to leave these scenes on the cutting-room floor, as it were. He edited

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in some snazzy Klezmer music and uploaded the video on YouTube (<http://tiny.cc/WqjqC>).

Within days we got hundreds of hits, and e-mails from strangers chortling over the display. But few mentioned the book, which made me wonder about the video's impact on sales. The answer lay in my Amazon rating, which I checked so many times a day my husband suggested a twelve-step program. When I wasn't sneaking yet another peek, I struggled to learn Dreamweaver in order to manage my site. For someone who didn't know how to burn a CD, this process was even more excruciating than learning Russian grammar. Meanwhile, Random House lobbed the book at litblogs, which, I was assured, were as effective in shaping tastes as *The New York Times Book Review*.

"Readers Love *Home Girl!*" proclaimed the marketing lady, attaching sample reviews from something called LibraryThing. Great. Now I had to worry not only about *Publishers Weekly*, but also what Paperdoll and Bookmama had to say.

Even so, I appreciated this virtual populist revolt against the tyranny of the elites. Anyone with a laptop, apparently, could become a book reviewer. These citizen readers didn't care what *The New York Times Book Review* thought—they liked what they liked.

Greedy for more virtual coverage, I approached an online publicist, FSB Associates, which had created best sellers via Web buzz alone. Among its trophies: the wildly popular *The Prosecution of George W. Bush for Murder* by Vincent Bugliosi, which no mainstream press would touch initially. Could FSB work the same magic for me?

The publicist assigned to me, Julie, was nothing short of industrious. In ninety days, she placed sixty-eight online reviews and features, ten podcasts, and about a dozen syndicated reprints of essays linked to the book. Quite a show!

Yet, once the novelty wore off, my skepticism reemerged. I realized that online fans of *Home Girl* didn't necessarily embrace my best interests—making money. The ultimate betrayal came from Upfromsloth, a self-described

"reluctant debutante turned aspiring punk rocker turned Stepford wife." After extolling my writing, she recommended that readers get library cards. Library cards. "It's all free books!" she trilled. "For free! You don't have to buy them first!"

Day-by-day analysis showed that, minus a mention on Instapundit, the biggest sales boosts came from the traditional media—especially an appearance on *Fox and Friends*, followed by an excerpt in *The Financial Times* and a profile and review in *The Washington Post*.

After that, it becomes murky. Did a glowing review in *The Christian Science Monitor* account for one particularly good week, or was that because of an e-blast to twelve hundred people? Did anyone actually buy a copy based on the recommendation of Librarium?

I'll never know.

The biggest sales boosts still came from traditional media.

What I do know is that I'd like to get rid of some of my "friends," especially a woman whom I hadn't seen in thirty-four years who nags me to answer her e-mails. And that fan mail from strangers warms the heart, but then I feel compelled to produce considered, literary replies. And that's the problem with Facebook—it's so very public, and one can't exactly ignore the writing on the wall. Who has time to be in regular communication with hundreds of people? But I don't dare dump anyone just yet. The paperback only came out in July, and then of course there's the next book. **CJR**

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