

July 2014

How to Write a Bestseller: Excerpts from a speech given at the Pacific Program Leadership Dinner on Saturday, October 6, 2001

Dave Frohnmayer
University of Oregon

Recommended Citation

Frohnmayer, D. (2014). How to Write a Bestseller: Excerpts from a speech given at the Pacific Program Leadership Dinner on Saturday, October 6, 2001. *OLA Quarterly*, 8(1), 4-5+. <http://dx.doi.org/10.7710/1093-7374.1604>

How to Write a Best Seller

Excerpts from a speech given at the Pacific Program
Leadership Dinner on Saturday, October 6, 2001

by Dave Frohnmayer
President,
University of Oregon

... As are so many things following September 11, this talk lies in the shadows of terrorism and its aftermath.

And in that shadow lie many questions: What do we do, as a nation and a people, when no one really cares any more who wants to be a millionaire, when the true meaning of “survivor” has put to shame anything television could offer as drama, and when the most ordinary of citizens have proven to be the strongest links to human greatness?

Beyond our national response—actually as a vital cord in that response—most of us are asking questions and searching for answers in ways far deeper, far more personal and far-reaching than we have in some time.

So it is in that frame of reference, that shadow, that I offer these thoughts on “writing your own best seller”—hoping in the process to offer some light ... to light the way, if just a bit. ...

There are many amazing facets of our society that one can look at that will give you clues as to where our culture is going—where we are going. ...

... Take a look at best-selling books, past and present. I think we can learn something about ourselves by looking at this list.

And I think, in the process, we might also be able to see what it is that we value enough to put it into our own best-seller, which—written or not—is the life we each live—the leadership we offer in that life—the book we work on every day.

Best sellers of the past have included a wide variety of titles, reflecting of course their own times and the people of those times.

In the last century ... each decade brought its own particular books. The first decade of the century gave us Jack London’s *The Call of the Wild* and Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle*.

The teens produced a book called *America’s Coming of Age* and another, *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*, that reflected the growing challenge of that age.

The 1920s brought us the jazz tales of F. Scott Fitzgerald and the mystery

tales of Agatha Christie.

In the 30s, Faulkner brought us *Light in August*, Hemingway gave us *Death in the Afternoon*, and John Steinbeck took us through the best-laid plans *Of Mice and Men*.

In the 40s Ernie Pyle wrote *This Is Your War*, and George Orwell wrote *Animal Farm*.

By the 1950s some of our tastes were turning just a bit as we read Ray Bradbury’s *Martian Chronicles* and Ian Fleming’s *Casino Royale*.

We’re half way through the century now. And I’m really not trying to point out any deep or meaningful trends—other than that the writing and the reading of particular times seem to accurately reflect the hopes and fears of that time.

By the 1960s, our hopes and fears were so varied as to see us reading everything from Ken Kesey’s *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* to Jacqueline Susann’s *Valley of the Dolls*.

And in the 70s we embraced a seagull named Jonathan Livingston, a warren of rabbits living in *Watership Down* and generations of African Americans whose true story was told in Alex Haley’s *Roots*.

By the 80s our concerns were way out there and deep inside as we read Carl Sagan’s *Cosmos*, as well as *Jane Fonda’s Workout Book*—although some things never change, as we pored over several books by Stephen King, Tom Clancy and Danielle Steele.

And as the century ended, an interesting thing began to happen. As we started to look ahead into a new century and a new millennium, we also looked back. We looked back at Ken Burns’ *The Civil War*, and *Scarlet*, the sequel to *Gone With the Wind*. But we also looked ahead, reading all we could about the future in *Megatrends 2000*, all we could about our health in *Eight Weeks to Optimum Health*, and all about money in *Wealth Without Risk*.

Here we are now—the 21st century ...

And as we sit here this evening, looking forward to the leadership opportunities—opportunities that will offer a chance for each of us to make a difference—it is worthy to look at ourselves, see



where we have been and decide just where we want to go.

What kind of best sellers do we want our lives to write?

Or if someone wrote a best seller about our lives, what book would it be like?

Pride and Prejudice?

The Odyssey?

Heart of Darkness?

Pilgrim's Progress?

The Trial?

Being and Nothingness?

Or maybe something a bit more contemporary ...

Misery? (Stephen King)

Waiting to Exhale? (Terry McMillan)

Bag of Bones? (Stephen King)

Or *A Man in Full?* (Tom Wolfe)

There's just about something for every life. Even our current best sellers give us a lot of leeway—and say something about where our society is today.

The number one best seller this past summer in the non-fiction hardback category is a book about a horse—*Seabiscuit*.

Maybe it's safer nowadays to look back through the life of a famous horse than through the lives of famous people—and you're less likely to get sued ...

The advice best sellers are of particular interest and range from the number one *The Prayers of Jabez*, a real surprise from a publisher in Sisters, to books about improving things at work (*Who Moved My Cheese*), improving your body (*Body for Life*) and improving your baby (*Secrets of the Baby Whisperer*). ...

Given this variety of best sellers, I've had a few ideas myself that I've been playing around with:

Winning Friends and Influencing People While Running a University. It will be filled with lessons learned from a fictitious college president on the utter frustration of trying to keep all your constituents happy all the time.

Great Recipes from the Chicken Dinner Circuit—a compilation of all the ways I've been served chicken during the course of four decades in public life. Sure to be a best seller.

And then there's *Ballot Titles In Oregon: The Secrets to Life as Gleaned from Oregon Ballot Titles*—with a foreword by Bill Sizemore—a book of several volumes.

As you see, the books we read come from all directions, they entertain, inform, inspire, make us laugh, make us think, make us look back and look forward, as well as look inward and outward.

There are two types of books being published and selling quite well that impress me—and that I think have some relevance on what I am trying to say. ...

One of these is the book that takes a seemingly small incident in history—perhaps a small or simple thing done by an individual or group of people—and shows how it has made a real difference in our world today.

Two books of this sort that stand out are *How the Irish Saved Civilization* and *Longitude*.

The first book, by Thomas Cahill, tells of how a small group of monks on a small island in the Atlantic kept some of civilization's key writings from being destroyed and then spread out across the continent of Europe teaching from these sources and shaping the making of the Western mind.

The second book, *Longitude*, written by Dava Sobel, tells the story of 18th century John Harrison and his five-decade long quest to create a timepiece that could be accurately used to determine longitude aboard sailing ships. It was his success that truly opened the world to more than random exploration.

What I like about these books is the same thing I like about some of my heroes—John and Abigail Adams, Abraham Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt. ... They are stories of people who may not have at first realized it, but most everything they did had meaning and purpose—most everything they did mattered.

Those nameless monks in the 5th, 6th and 7th centuries who cared for the texts


See How to Write a Best Seller page 23



and from within our professional organizations. Any reactions on our part as a profession will have to reflect the need to honor that variety. Our precious diversity often makes it difficult to speak in one voice on all topics. We also need to concede that our profession in this country, conceived not long before the Civil War, does not rank among older, more established professions when we envision the entire span of human history. Our maturity and experience as a profession, and most importantly, the development of our professional ethics and principles, have been shaped by the context of the times, especially during and immediately following acts of war.

To our credit, our profession has already responded. Before the final passage of the PATRIOT Act, ALA, the Association of Research Libraries, the American Association of Law Libraries, and the Medical Library Association issued the "Library Community Statement on Pro-

posed Anti-Terrorism Measures," a statement outlining specific concerns about impending anti-terrorist legislation. At its Web site, ALA has begun providing assistance to libraries and librarians regarding the PATRIOT Act and its potential impact on library users. Finally, at our most recent midwinter meeting, ALA Council voted to reaffirm principles of intellectual freedom found in several important documents, the "Library Bill of Rights," "Libraries: An American Value," and the "Freedom to Read Statement."

As a result, we cannot employ our profession's often insidious bureaucracy or its splendid variety of voices as an excuse to take no action to oppose the abuse of the PATRIOT Act's intended legal use. Neither should we rest on the laurels of our profession's heroes. As individuals, we can choose to follow the example of Bowerman, Steiner, or Horn when the need to act arises and our conscience dictates. 

How to Write a Best Seller

Continued from page 5

of Plato and Aristotle, who copied them to keep them alive, and who later went out and taught the rest of Europe, were really only doing their small, individual work.

And while they knew it had importance in the eyes of their fellow monks—and in the eyes of God—they had no idea what importance or how far down the reaches of time it would extend.

And John Harrison, though highly aware of the importance of his invention, was at least initially concerned with winning the prize money being offered by the king. He did not know that his invention would enable his nation to create an empire that would—for better or worse—last for two centuries.

The point is that we don't know what our story is—often until it is long over—but we constantly, every moment of every day, have the opportunity to make it the best story possible.

Another type of book that I see selling well—and that I am happy to see selling well—is the book that looks back in history and tells us—reminds us again—of the accomplishments of people we think we already know—or of people we've never been exposed to.

These are as varied as Stephen Ambrose's *Undaunted Courage*, the story of the Lewis and Clark expedition; or *The Professor and the Madman*, the story of how a murderer and certified lunatic helped compile the *Oxford English Dictionary*; or *The Founding Brothers*, the intertwining tale of seven men who gave our nation its start.

There is yet another book I want to mention ... *Shackleton's Way*, by Margot Morrell and Stephanie Capparell. ...

Sir Ernest Shackleton was an Antarctic explorer whose mission in 1914 began with abject failure when his ship with 28 men aboard became stranded, then crushed and



destroyed by advancing ice floes nearly 1,200 miles from the nearest human habitation.

Incredibly, through his leadership skills, the crew not only survived but even thrived until ultimate rescue nearly two years later and after a daring 800-mile journey across open water in little more than a rowboat. Among the lessons of Shackleton's leadership example:

- The path to leadership is through an internal value system, one which is capable of turning bad experiences into valuable attitudes and skills.
- Choice of associates is crucial: look for the best, not the second-best—optimism is a key attribute.
- Create a spirit of camaraderie—through the creation of order and routine, let people know where they stand. Be fair and use informal gatherings to foster a sense of teamwork.
- Work to coach the best from each individual. Work one-on-one to help each person reach his or her highest potential.
- Lead effectively in crisis by letting the group know that the leader is in charge and confident of success. Project optimism and keep the malcontents close to you rather than ostracize them.
- Form teams to attack tough assignments—balance talent and expertise, remain visible and vigilant and shore up the weakest performers.
- Be ready to overcome obstacles to reach a goal. The biggest obstacles call for taking the biggest risks and for unyielding focus on the big-picture outcome.

I believe we've seen examples of this kind of leadership in the past few weeks. It is interesting how the worst brings out the best. Churchill was a failed politician

until the challenge of World War II. And the example I just mentioned—Shackleton—failed in most of his business ventures, yet succeeded marvelously when faced with the challenge of a lifetime.

I am intrigued by these books because of what they say about us—and again it is much the same—it is that what we do matters—that what we do can have consequences that reach far beyond our own lifetimes. ...

Each of us chooses who we will be.

Yes, some of us are given seeming advantages, skills and abilities.

Some of us, it might seem, are in the right place at the right time.

Some of us seem to have a better sense of good storytelling than others.

And in terms of leadership, some seem born to it, while others have to work harder to get there. But leadership is a learned behavior and we can get better at it!

... The truth is that ... each of us has the ability to write the story we want, given the material we have—to write a great and meaningful story—our own “best seller.”

As a part of this we can also ... help write the stories, help create the best sellers for others.

This is what a vital part of leadership is—to enable others to write their own stories.

In the end, as in the very best of stories, the very finest of writing, the strands of the stories all weave together.

What we do—each of our own stories—affects the other stories they touch—and in the process makes those stories either better or worse—the choice is ours. ...

As in a Dickens tale, no one is here by accident. Each person we meet—each character in our stories—is here for a purpose. I believe we have to believe that now, more than ever. It is my hope that in each of our stories—best sellers that they are—we work out our plots with care and kindness, through joy and pain, laughter and tears—the stuff of life—to enable many other stories to become the best sellers they deserve to be. This is the need for our time.

This is the heart of leadership. ... 