

The Long Unabom Manhunt Becomes a Paperback Sprint

Doreen Carvajal

May 2, 1996

With the shipment of its first load of Unabom paperbacks yesterday, it appears Warner Books has triumphed in a frantic literary 100-yard dash made fierce by its tantalizing prize: a quickie book with the shelf life of a head of lettuce.

Warner Books managed to overtake the erstwhile front-runner, Pocket Books — the original pioneer of quickie books — whose fuming lawyers and top executives were left to ponder whether to defy an F.B.I. bureaucracy that has effectively stalled their finished book.

The whole thing is just kind of annoying,” said an irritated Mark Olshaker, the co-author of the Pocket Books manuscript, which was completed 13 days after the capture of the Unabomber suspect, Theodore J. Kaczynski, on April 3. The book was then submitted for standard review by the Federal Bureau of Investigation because its co-author, John Douglas, is a retired agent. “If this is the F.B.I.’s idea of expediency, then I can see why it took them 18 years to catch the Unabomber,” Mr. Olshaker said.

In the furious world of speed literature, where books do not linger longer than the baseball season, nice publishers finish last. To be first is critical — and often extremely profitable — because demand slackens for second- or third-place finishers by as much as 25 percent, according to Barnes & Noble, the nation’s largest bookstore chain.

Written and sold in less than four weeks, instant books may have fleeting life spans, but they do have a long, cherished history in the publishing industry. They have flourished in more primitive forms since Pocket Books published its first quickie, a 1945 memorial that appeared six days after Franklin D. Roosevelt died. These books, in turn, spawned a class of slower-moving cousins, “crash books,” which are turned out, on average, in about six weeks.

Traditionally, publishers devoted instant books or “extras” to weighty matters, ranging from the Kennedy assassination to the Pentagon Papers, but more recently the best-selling instant books have plumbed celebrity and true crime — O. J. Simpson, “Long Island Lolita,” and “Selena! The Phenomenon, Life and Tragic Death of the Tejano Music Queen.”

“They’ve really become trivialized in the last few years,” said Kenneth C. Davis, author of “Two-Bit Culture,” a history of the paperback industry.

With the focus on the sensational, a few publishing houses have actually refined the production of instant books into a precision drill that has its own Hollywood-style rituals to bluff the competition, lock up sales orders and ultimately emerge first with a book.

“If you can get into the press that you are doing a book by a certain date — even if it’s unrealistic — it can help to discourage the potential competition,” said Charles Spicer, an editor at St. Martin’s Press, who has presided over so many instant books that in the trade he has been labeled the quickie book kingpin. “You’re not lying. You just set an unrealistic publishing date and do your best to make it.”

At St. Martin’s Press — which has published a modern library of crime quickies about Amy Fisher, O. J. Simpson, Jeffrey L. Dahmer and John E. du Pont — books

are typically churned out in three weeks. And when there is competition, a necessary part of the production process is spying.

“You get neck and neck,” Mr. Spicer said. “You are basically trying to find out from the booksellers how fast the competition is. You constantly have your ear to the ground.”

Timing is critical because instant books are as perishable as yesterday’s headlines. Pocket Books produced an instant best seller about the slain Tejano singer Selena Quintanilla-Perez, even though many people on its own staff had never even heard of the star.

“We were absolutely shocked at the success,” said Tom Fogarty, president of distribution services for Pocket’s corporate parent, Simon & Schuster, a unit of Viacom Inc. “In all honesty, we got the offering from an agent right after she died. And we noticed that when People magazine had her on the cover, they sold out completely. So we went ahead with that information.”

“The Packwood Report,” essentially the Senate report about accusations of sexual misconduct against former Senator Bob Packwood, flopped when it appeared after the Senator had already resigned.

Readers have also ignored some overexposed themes — a spate of books about the duel between the Olympic skaters Tonya Harding and Nancy Kerrigan failed to attract a large number of book buyers. Kensington Publishing, which also specializes in instant crime books, could not build readership for its tale of John Wayne Bobbitt, who received widespread publicity when his estranged wife severed his penis.

“We took all the transcripts of the trial and boiled them down with a picture section to let the public decide who was right and who was wrong, but, unfortunately, it didn’t do well,” Paul Dinas, a Kensington editor, said.

The risks are perilous to publishers who must briefly divert all their resources from their standard books and pay overtime costs to produce a quickie book. Some publishers say privately that a failure is not worth the gamble. And even the one-time dean of quickie publishing — Bantam Books — has methodically pulled out of the field because it contends that it’s too tough to compete with other purveyors of instant information like CNN.

It was Bantam that christened the term, “extras” when it published books 76 hours after the Apollo 11 splashdown or six days after President Richard M. Nixon relinquished the White House tapes. Those were heady times, when sometimes the management ordered up instant books partly to improve morale, Stuart Applebaum, a Bantam spokesman, recalled.

“We had a good time because there was nothing that gets your adrenaline pumping faster and the company pulling together,” he said. “That’s the upside. The downside is that these books derail your ongoing publishing program.”

Those were the risks that Warner Books and Pocket Books faced hours after Mr. Kaczynski’s arrest in Montana. Gina Centrello, Pocket’s president and publisher, was the first to announce a book, trumpeting the signing of a former F.B.I. agent, John

Douglas, an expert on serial killers who had actually helped prepare the original psychological profile of the Unabomber.

Mr. Douglas and his co-writer, Mr. Olshaker, had already written a best-selling book about serial killers. Given their knowledge and expertise, Pocket announced an April 25 publication date — a deadline that was almost immediately apparent could not be met. The rapid turnaround and the special expertise of Mr. Douglas quickly scared off other publishers, like St. Martin's and Kensington, which had also been approached by agents with instant book deals.

But it did not deter Laurence Kirshbaum, president of Warner Books, a unit of Time Warner Inc., which has expansive plans to create more instant books with the resources of its magazines like Time. One of the first steps both publishers took was to create instant book covers, "one-sheeters," which were copied and distributed to the sales force who were intent on locking up sales before their rivals arrived.

Initially, it was Pocket Books that took the lead in rapidly writing, editing, and marshaling its sales force, which generally made it to the bookstores first. But after the two writers delivered six copies of their manuscript, "UNABOMBER: On the Trail of America's Most-Wanted Serial Killer," to the F.B.I. on April 16, the lead rapidly vanished. Pocket Books executives had assumed that Mr. Douglas, as a well-known agency veteran, would get quick approval.

But Pat Solley, a unit chief with the F.B.I., said the agency had 30 working days to complete a review. "We're grinding on," she said. "I really couldn't say when it will come."

Today, lawyers for Pocket Books are scheduled to meet in Washington with F.B.I. lawyers to press their case for completion of the review. "I'm very unhappy we're not out," Ms. Centrello said. "But we are dealing with sensitive information."

Naturally, the Warner sales force was quick to draw the attention of the bookstores to the grinding gears of the Federal bureaucracy. Meanwhile, Warner speeded up its book production with triple shifts at a printing plant near Buffalo to move up shipment of "MAD GENIUS: The Odyssey, Pursuit and Capture of the Suspected Unabomber." The book should appear in a few stores today.

At a black tie dinner in New York earlier this week, the rival publishers — Mr. Kirshbaum and Ms. Centrello — politely confronted each other. Mr. Kirshbaum related the conversation: "She said, 'How come your salespeople are saying nasty things about our book?' And I said, 'Our salespeople are only telling the truth — we will be first.'"

The Ted K Archive

Doreen Carvajal
The Long Unabom Manhunt Becomes a Paperback Sprint
May 2, 1996

New York Times, May 2, 1996, Section A, Page 1. <www.nytimes.com>

www.thetedkarchive.com