

December 15, 2004

A New Forum (Blogging) Inspires the Old (Books)

By JOSHUA KURLANTZICK

Like many aspiring authors, Marrit Ingman had a tough time convincing publishers that her big book idea - a wry, downbeat memoir of postpartum depression - could sell.

"I had to convince the publisher that an audience for the topic really did exist," said Ms. Ingman, a Texas-based freelance journalist. "The big publishers kept telling us that mothers only wanted prescriptive or 'positive' books about being a parent."

But Ms. Ingman had her own persuader: her Web log. She'd been writing it for two years and had attracted a following of mothers.

"I turned to readers of my blog," she said. "I asked them to comment on whether a book like mine would be relevant to them. Readers wrote back expressing why they wanted to read about the experience of maternal anger. I stuck their comments into my proposal as pulled quotes."

Her readers were convincing. She and her agent, Jim Hornfischer, sold her memoir, "Inconsolable," to Seal Press in August, she said. "The blog showed publishers she was committed to the subject matter and already had an audience," Mr. Hornfischer said.

Bloggers have their own Web sites, on which they write frequently updated posts, almost like online diaries. The postings are about current events, culture, technology or their own lives. Many of their postings contain links to relevant sites.

During the last year many Web logs, or blogs, have focused on the war in Iraq and the presidential campaign, and as these blogs gained a wider audience some publishers started paying attention to them. Sometimes publishers are interested in publishing elements of the blogs in book form; mostly they simply enjoy the blogger's writing and want to publish a novel or nonfiction book by the blogger, usually on a topic unrelated to the blog.

One of the first to make the transition was Baghdad blogger known as Salam Pax, who wrote an online war diary from Iraq. Last year Grove Press published a collection of his work, "Salam Pax: The Clandestine Diary of an Ordinary Iraqi."

In June a former Senate aide, Jessica Cutler, whose blog documenting her sexual exploits with politicians dominated Capitol gossip in the spring, sold a Washington-focused novel to Hyperion for an advance well into six figures, said Kelly Notaras of Hyperion.

Meanwhile, a British call girl with the pseudonym Belle de Jour, who had created a sensation with a blog about her experiences, has signed a six-figure deal with Warner Books to publish a memoir, said Amy Einhorn, executive editor at Warner Books who bought the book.

Ms. Einhorn said that after she heard about the blog, "I downloaded the whole site, read it that night and then bought the book."

In October Ana Marie Cox, editor of wonkette.com, a racy, often wry Washington-based blog, sold her first novel, "Dog Days," a comic tale with a political context, to Riverhead Books. She said she received a \$275,000 advance.

Lesser-known bloggers are also peddling books. Julie Powell, a Queens secretary who blogged about trying to make every recipe in Julia Child's "Mastering the Art of French Cooking (Volume 1)" during the course of a year, signed with Little, Brown to write about the experience.

Gordon Atkinson, a minister and blogger known as Real Live Preacher, published a collection of his work this fall with Eerdmans Publishing Company, a leader in religious books.

An editor "found my blog only three weeks after I started it and asked if I was interested in doing a book," he said, adding, "I was so surprised I thought he was my friend Larry playing a joke on me."

All this has begun to stimulate even more interest among editors and agents. For instance, Kate Lee, an

assistant at International Creative Management talent agency in New York, has become a kind of one-woman blog boutique, surfing for the best writers online and suggesting they work with her to develop and sell a book.

"Initially, I was just e-mailing," she said, "and I'd get an e-mail from people saying 'so-and-so said I should contact you,' and I became friendly with this circle of blogger pundits."

Ms. Lee now represents Elizabeth Spiers, who founded Gawker.com, the media- and entertainment-oriented blog, and is now writing a satirical novel about Wall Street. Ms. Lee also represents, among others, Glenn Reynolds, a University of Tennessee law professor and political blogger known as Instapundit.

Several factors make bloggers' books attractive to agents and editors. "Word-of-mouth buzz is much more valuable than paid advertising," Ms. Lee said. "I think if there's a reason people come to your site, there's a built-in audience."

Publishers were always happy to have authors who already have a platform, said Mr. Hornfischer, who also has started contacting other bloggers he enjoys. That built-in blog audience is growing; because the Web has no boundaries, it is international. The Perseus Development Corporation, a research-and-development firm that studies online trends, estimates there will be roughly 10 million hosted Web logs by the end of the year. Nearly 90 percent of blogs, Perseus says, are created by people under 30.

"The moment we did the deal" for Belle de Jour's book, said Patrick Walsh, a literary agent who sold Belle's book in Britain, "I got calls from a Portuguese publisher - they were big fans of her blog in Portugal," and wanted the rights.

Charlotte Abbott, the books news editor at Publishers Weekly, cited the hipness factor. "It's still got a sexy quotient from media feature coverage, in part because it's a new medium, and writers are still testing its limits," she said.

Not everyone, though, is convinced that bloggers' skills translate to longer-form books. "The style of blog writing is more oriented towards short form one page, set in the moment," said Scott Rettberg, an assistant professor of new media studies at the Richard Stockton College of New Jersey in Pomona. "The sense of immediacy is quite important in blogs."

Even bloggers who have sold books agree that there is one topic they would not focus on in the longer-form novel: blogging. "I don't know how interesting a book just about the blogosphere would be," Ms. Cox said. "It'd just be people sitting in front of their computers."

Ms. Spiers summed up the general feeling: "There are no bloggers in my novel. None."

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