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Bailouts of the Self-Help Kind: Self Help Books in a Down Economy

Self-improvement and survival strategies in today's economy

By Gwenda Bond -- Publishers Weekly, 4/6/2009

Millions of jobs lost. Companies struggling to stay afloat. Economies around the world teetering on the brink of ruin. No one reads today's headlines and feels better. But the endless litany of bad news might have a silver lining for one segment of publishing: the self-help category. Conventional industry wisdom holds that books focusing on personal improvement have done well in recessions past, and that the current downturn will be no different. The scale of this recession—and its impact on book sales—clearly offers publishers of self-help titles both challenges and opportunities.

In December, Atria Books received the latest manuscript from Spencer Johnson, M.D., author of the self-help cultural phenomenon *Who Moved My Cheese?* published back in 1998. The publisher realized Johnson's new book, *Peaks and Valleys: Making Good Times and Bad Times Work for You—At Work and in Life*, was tailor-made for the current economy, but had planned to release the title in the fall. Atria publisher Judith Curr and editorial director Peter Borland quickly made the decision to move the title up to a March release, with an initial print run of 350,000 copies.

"People were keen to have it come out now," says Curr. "We foreshortened the process to get it out, because it really does tell people how to deal with bad times and prepare for improvements."

Even given the accelerated schedule, Curr says they have planned a year's worth of publicity. That clock began with 15,000 ARCs rushed out for the holiday season, a mailing that paired one gift-wrapped copy to be passed on with an unwrapped copy. And, in a concession to the current climate, the publisher decided to match the \$19.95 price of Johnson's 1998 book. The early-publishing gamble has paid off: the book marks week three on today's nonfiction list.

Like many who oversee books in the self-help field, Curr emphasizes that having a brand-name author helps, especially now. "People don't want to waste money on speculative things. So many people in business have let us down that readers want to know who advice is coming from," she says.

At Grand Central's Springboard Press, editorial director Karen Murgolo cites the press's breakout titles—Ben Sherwood's *The Survivors Club* and Charla Krupp's *How Not to Look Old*—as similar success stories featuring prominent authors. "The books and authors that do well in this category now are those who are either regulars on a national television show or have found a way to reach many people through publicity in both the traditional and online arenas," Murgolo says.

But publicity platforms aside, people in the category agree on a shift toward books that offer a more internal focus. Atria's Borland holds that *Peaks and Valleys* highlights the trend: "This is a book about changing on the inside, how you can internally change and adapt. It's a sophisticated approach to self-improvement."

It seems that perhaps in hard times more than ever, people just want to be happy.

Desperately Seeking Self-Empowerment

Many of the season's books reflect the new focus on making life changes from the inside out, rather than on reacting to external forces. In a time when most people feel the larger picture is far outside their personal control, publishers hope inner change will be a smart selling point.

Books with a spiritual or religious slant to their advice are holding up better than any other trade category, according to Dutton editor-at-large Amy Hertz. One of the publisher's March titles, Christine Ranck's *Ignite the Genius Within*, seems designed to appeal to readers looking for a new approach to spiritual growth. The book's four-color images are intended to combine with a podcast soundtrack from iAmplify to bring on a more creative state of mind.

“Difficult times are the moment to take chances with your talent and creativity, to get ahead of the game so that you can stay in the game,” says Hertz. “Given the economic crisis, how do I survive is the number one question. The answer is not going to be found in books on financial strategy or job strategy.”

With no significant sign of a change in the current job market, several publishers are betting that readers will be seeking help to reduce worry and stress, with a side of personal development. New titles typifying this trend include Alice D. Domar’s *Be Happy Without Being Perfect: How to Worry Less and Enjoy Life More* (Three Rivers), Mary Beth Sammons’s *Second Acts That Change Lives* (Red Wheel Weiser/Conari), BJ Gallagher’s *It’s Never Too Late to Be What You Might Have Been* (Viva Editions) and Tal Ben-Shahar’s *The Pursuit of Perfect* (McGraw-Hill).

Not everyone believes it’s curtains for books with a more business-oriented mindset, however. While McGraw-Hill has seen some backlist sales take a hit, the publisher has also had bumps for titles that deal with interpersonal communication, says consumer editorial publisher Judith McCarthy, citing the perennial bestseller *How to Talk to Anyone* by Leil Lowndes. “I attribute this to people who haven’t looked for a job in a while having to reinvigorate their networking skills,” says McCarthy.

She hopes that Lowndes’s follow-up, *How to Instantly Connect with Anyone*, will also be popular among job-seekers looking to improve their networking and interviewing prospects.

Apparently, even some banking executives are looking to broaden their personal horizons. Live Consciously Publishing’s *Your Legacy of Love: Realize the Gift in Goodbye* by Gemini Adams has already garnered attention from investment banks with its U.K. release. The author recently spoke at a bank before an audience of trust managers, bankers and lawyers interested in the book’s message: financial assets are not an individual’s sole wealth.

“Not the crowd you would typically find lining up for a self-help title,” Adams observes. “The private banking manager who organized the talk felt it would help heal some of the wounds that have been left for their clients as a result of the financial losses that many have suffered due to the downturn in the markets. They believe that their clients are in a reflective mode, seeking something more satisfying, possibly even something a little spiritual.”

Advice with a Twist

Just as brand-name authors have become increasingly important to the category, books with a strong, conversational point-of-view have also become the norm.

“Today’s self-help books have crossed over into other genres, including lifestyle, humor and gift categories,” says Susan Pi, Ten Speed’s associate publicist. “Today’s new breed of self-help titles incorporates a brash and irreverent no-holds-barred tone with a visually entertaining style that appeals to a broad audience.”

Ten Speed’s Celestial Arts published a key example a few years ago, *How to Be Happy, Dammit: A Cynic’s Guide to Spiritual Happiness*, which has sold 180,000 copies to date. The publisher believes *Life’s Too F***ing Short: A Guide to Getting What You Want Out of Life Without Wasting Time, Effort, or Money* by Janet Street-Porter will appeal to the same target demo.

The turn away from impersonal instruction is a fundamental shift for the category, according to Michele Matrisciani, HCI’s editorial director: “I see a change in self-help that moves from hard-core prescription to more of a hybrid of memoir and indirect prescription.” A case in point is HCI’s *Blue Collar and Proud of It: The All-in-One Resource for Finding Freedom, Financial Success, and Security Outside the Cubicle* by Joe Lamacchia (with Bridget Samburg), which focuses on the author’s personal story, styling itself as a blue-collar *What Color Is My Parachute?* Lamacchia’s story of going from poor student with ADD to owner of a successful landscaping company is a rags-to-riches how-to aimed at aspiring entrepreneurs who aren’t necessarily looking to become Wall Street barons.

But whether readers are in the mood for enlightenment, financial triage or just help that’s cheaper than therapy, Ten Speed’s Pi observes that the category innately holds broad appeal during downturns. “By its very nature, self-help addresses the deficiencies felt by many Americans during tough economic times,” she says. “The loss of the American dream for a better, richer, and fuller life creates a market for books that have the power to restore balance.”

Or at least to serve as a reminder that in an increasingly topsy-turvy world, balance may still be possible.

Coping with Life, Death, Diabetes

For years, recovery existed in self-help's shadow, but now it's an established home to in-depth treatments for some of life's most intense experiences like addiction, depression and death.

"Fifteen or 20 years ago, recovery books almost looked like a publishing fad—12-step and other programs came into general public consciousness, and there was a whole segment of the market that wondered if they were in fact addicted to something, even if it had never occurred to them before," says Elizabeth Beier, executive editor at St. Martin's. "Now the recovery market is more mature, and also more serious—people are writing books that they really would have had a hard time coming out with before."

Beier points to the publisher's own *Stay Close: A Mother's Story of Her Son's Addiction* by Libby Cataldi. Rather than a traditional guide through the recovery process, the memoir offers an intimate look at the recovery process from both mother and son's situation. In the past, parents might have been afraid—or ashamed—to speak out.

A new take on the hot topic of prescription drug addiction comes from Michael Stein, M.D.'s *The Addict: One Patient, One Doctor, One Year* from Morrow. Executive editor Mary Ellen O'Neill calls the book "a readerly memoir, a rewarding read."

Less earnest readers may gravitate toward the self-deprecating humor in A.J. Adams's *Undrunk: A Skeptic's Guide to AA*, coming out this month from Hazelden. Over the summer, the publisher will release the first book that specifically addresses gambling addiction among women, *Taking Back Your Life: Women and Problem Gambling*, an issue that affects an estimated five million women in the U.S. alone.

Treatments for depression have become almost as prominent in the recovery category as those for addiction. Michael Yapko's *Depression Is Contagious* (Free Press) posits that the main causes of the depression epidemic are unhealthy relationships and a lack of social connection, and proposes solutions on an individual level.

The self-help/recovery category is also home to a plethora of books that offer advice and insight into life with physical health issues, like the American Diabetes Association's titles *Diabetes 911: How to Handle Everyday Emergencies* and *Real Life Guide to Diabetes*, which, according to ADA associate director Abe Odgen, "has a friendly, magazine-type layout that presents complex self-care techniques and information in an easy-to-read format."

Finally, the category also offers aid for the inevitable grief over the loss of a loved one. A close friend of Amy Opperman Cash at Lerner Books brought her attention to Paul Bennett's *Loving Grief* after finding comfort in the then self-published book following the loss of a spouse. Opperman Cash read the manuscript and recognized a fresh approach to the grieving process. "The book explores the equation between love and grief—how it's a natural part of a loving relationship," she says. "It's really about how you can become a better person through grieving."—G.B.

A Date with Love and Marriage

Even if everyone found inner balance and financial prosperity tomorrow, one segment of the self-help category would still be doing hot business: relationships.

Single woman in need of dating advice? Not a problem. Crown offers two titles by prominent relationship experts. Rachel Greenwald, well-known dating coach and author of *Find a Husband After 35: Using What I Learned at Harvard Business School*, returns with *Why He Didn't Call You Back*. Greenwald conducted 1,000 exit interviews to find out why men didn't call women after a first date. And Michelle Callan—no stranger to national media outlets like *Oprah* and *Today*—offers tips on figuring out how women might be sabotaging their dating prospects with *Ms. Typed: Discover Your True Dating Personality and Rewrite Your Romantic Future*.

At Kensington's Citadel imprint, Jamie Cat Callan's advice/memoir *French Women Don't Sleep Alone* presents a twist on traditional dating books. "Often the message in American books is what you're doing wrong," says Citadel editor-in-chief Michaela Hamilton. "This book takes a positive approach and says this is how you can do it and enjoy the process."

Callan's book draws from the author's life in France and interviews with French women. Hamilton views the title as part of the category's shift to more personal voices. "Readers can get information for free on the Internet, so books must offer something different," she says.

Books targeting married couples continue to be popular. Norton is releasing an updated version of its classic title *Passionate*

Marriage, which features a new introduction by author David Schnarch. With more than 300,000 copies sold, senior editor Amy Cherry says the book still maintains a special draw: “Most relationship books end up appealing to women. David’s is as welcoming to men as to women.”

For a couple facing infidelity, Ten Speed offers *Transcending Post–Infidelity Stress Disorder: The Six Stages of Healing* by Dennis Ortman. Project editor Lisa Westmoreland cites the increase in high-profile cases of adultery involving people like David Beckham, Donald Trump and Eliot Spitzer as a sign infidelity is becoming more mainstream. Ortman’s book, she says, “legitimizes the real trauma people feel when discovering an affair.”

And then there are those books that chronicle singular relationships with a special appeal—like HCI’s forthcoming title by the famous Mary Jo Buttafuoco: *Getting It Through My Thick Skull: Why I Stayed, What I Learned, and What Millions of People Involved with Sociopaths Need to Know*. —G.B.

Banishing Clutter

While one side of the economic picture has readers looking for help making do with less, publishers are still seeing demand for titles that help deal with an overabundance of clutter.

Each new clutter book stakes out a slightly different approach. Red Wheel Weiser/Conari’s *Clutter No More* by Barb Rogers applies the 12-step program, holding that clutter is an addiction to be worked through like any other, while life coach Gail Blanke guides readers on a room-by-room, step-by-step path to clarity in *Throw Out Fifty Things: Clear the Clutter, Find Your Life* (Springboard Press).

Brooks Palmer’s *Clutter Busting: Letting Go of What’s Holding You Back* (New World Library) takes an even more spiritual approach, emphasizing how having too much stuff can actively worsen life by damaging the prospects for happiness. New World’s editorial director Georgia Hughes says the demand for such books is easy to understand given the current climate. “With the changes in the economy and the world, people are pulling back, realizing that rampant consumerism isn’t serving them or their environment well. Readers know they have too much stuff, but they don’t know how to let it go.”

Perhaps the best known clutter expert is Peter Walsh, whose *It’s All Too Much* and *Does This Clutter Make My Butt Look Fat?* found tens of thousands of buyers. In Walsh’s latest, *Enough Already! Clearing Mental Clutter to Become the Best You*, he proposes a systematic approach to banish clutter in six key life areas—relationships, work, family, finances, health and spirituality.

“Peter has already helped people clear the external clutter in their homes and realize the physical impact of clutter, and now he tackles the six key areas of your life that are impacted by internal, or mental, clutter,” says Free Press associate publisher Suzanne Donahue. “Clutter and organization books are so popular because people’s lives today are much more chaotic and overwhelmed by daily demands than they were in the past.” —G.B.

New Books Discussed in This Feature

Peaks and Valleys: Making Good and Bad Times Work for You—At Work and In Life by Spencer Johnson, M.D. (Atria, \$19.95, Mar.; ISBN 978-1-4391-0325-8)

It’s Never Too Late to Be What You Might Have Been by BJ Gallagher (Viva Editions, \$15.95 paper, Apr.; ISBN 978-1-57344-357-9)

Be Happy Without Being Perfect: How to Worry Less and Enjoy Life More by Alice D. Domar and Alice Lesch Kelly (Three Rivers, \$13.95 paper, Mar.; ISBN 978-0-307-35488-4)

Ignite the Genius Within by Christine Ranck (Dutton, \$25, Mar.; ISBN 978-0-5259-5094-3)

Second Acts That Change Lives by Mary Beth Sammons (Red Wheel Weiser/Conari, \$14.95 paper, Mar.; ISBN 978-1-57324-368-1)

Life’s Too F*ing Short: A Guide to Getting What You Want Out of Life Without Wasting Time, Effort, or Money** by Janet Street-Porter (Ten Speed, \$15.95 paper, Aug.; ISBN 978-1-5876-1352-4)

Blue Collar and Proud of It: The All-in-One Resource for Finding Freedom, Financial Success and Security Outside the

Cubicle by Jo Lamacchia (HCI, \$15.95 paper, May; ISBN 978-0-75730-778-2)

Legacy of Love: Realize the Gift in Goodbye by Gemini Adams (Live Consciously Publishing, \$14.99 paper, May; ISBN 978-0-6151-9375-5)

The Survivors Club: The Secrets and Science That Could Save Your Life by Ben Sherwood (Grand Central, \$25.99, Jan.; ISBN 978-0-4465-8024-3)

How to Instantly Connect with Anyone: 96 All-New Little Tricks for Big Success in Business and Social Relationships by Leil Lowndes (McGraw-Hill, \$16.95 paper, May; ISBN 978-0-07-154585-3)

The Pursuit of Perfect by Tal Ben-Shahar (McGraw-Hill, \$22.95, Apr.; ISBN 978-0-07-160882-4)

The Addict: One Patient, One Doctor, One Year by Michael Stein, M.D. (Morrow, \$25.99, Mar.; ISBN 978-0-06-136813-4)

Depression Is Contagious: How the Most Common Mood Disorder Is Spreading Around the World and How to Stop It by Michael D. Yapko (Free Press, \$26, Sept.; ISBN 978-1-416-59074-3)

Stay Close: A Mother's Story of Her Son's Addiction by Libby Cataldi, St. Martin's, \$24.95, Apr.; ISBN 978-0-312-53878-2)

Undrunk: A Skeptic's Guide to AA by A.J. Adams (Hazelden, \$14.95 paper, Apr.; ISBN 978-1-59285720-3)

Taking Back Your Life: Women and Problem Gambling by Diane Rae Davis (Hazelden, \$14.95 paper, Aug.; ISBN 978-1-59285-732-6)

Loving Grief by Paul Bennett (Larson, \$10.95 paper, Aug.; ISBN 978-0-943914-64-0)

Passionate Marriage by David Schnarch (Norton, \$15.95 paper, Apr.; ISBN 978-0-393-33427-2)

French Women Don't Sleep Alone by Jamie Cat Callan (Citadel, \$12.95 paper, Mar.; ISBN 978-0-8065-3069-7)

Transcending Post-Infidelity Stress Disorder: The Six Stages of Healing by Dennis Ortman (Ten Speed, \$16.95 paper, June; ISBN 978-1-58761-334-0)

Ms. Typed: Discover Your True Dating Personality and Rewrite Your Romantic Future by Michelle Callahan (Crown, \$21.95, May; ISBN 978-0-307-40800-6)

Why He Didn't Call You Back: 1,000 Guys Reveal What They Really Thought About You After Your Date by Rachel Greenwald (Crown, \$23.95, Apr.; ISBN 978-0-307-40653-8)

Getting It Through My Thick Skull: Why I Stayed, What I Learned, and What Millions of People Involved with Sociopaths Need to Know by Mary Jo Buttafuoco (HCI, \$24.95, Aug.; ISBN 978-0-7573-1372-1)

Diabetes 911: How to Handle Everyday Emergencies by Larry A. Fox, M.D., and Sandra L. Weber, M.D. (American Diabetes Association, \$12.95 paper, Feb.; ISBN 978-1-580-40300-9)

The Real-Life Guide to Diabetes by Hope S. Warshaw and Joy Pape (American Diabetes Association, \$19.95 paper, Mar.; ISBN 978-1-580-40314-6)

Throw Out Fifty Things: Clear the Clutter, Find Your Life by Gail Blanke (Springboard, \$19.99, Mar.; ISBN 978-0-446-50579-6)

Enough Already! Clearing Mental Clutter to Become the Best You by Peter Walsh (Free Press, \$26, Mar.; ISBN 978-1-416-56018-0)

Clutter Busting: Letting Go of What's Holding You Back by Brooks Palmer (New World Library, \$13.95 paper, Mar.; ISBN 978-1-57731-659-6)

Clutter No More by Barb Rogers, Red Wheel Weiser/Conari, \$12.95 paper, Sept.; ISBN 978-1-57324-464-0)

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