

AT LAST! An Answer to That Vexing Question

Michael Cart

Remember the hilarious “Saturday Night Live” skit that featured Steve Martin and Bill Murray doing nothing but looking perplexedly into the TV camera while repeatedly saying—with various intonations—“What the *hell* is that?”

It was clutch-your-sides funny, but what does it have to do with *RUSH HOUR*, the subject of this article that editor Jana Fine has invited me to write? Um, quite a lot, actually, since the prevailing reaction to *RUSH HOUR*’s first two issues has been puzzlement of a scale to rival Martin-Murray’s.

So, the bewildered ask, “What the hell is it?”

Well, it’s simple, really: *RUSH HOUR* is a literary journal like the British magazine *Granta*. It’s published twice a year, in the spring and the fall, by Delacorte Press, and it’s targeted at readers aged sixteen to twenty-four. So why the confusion? I suspect it derives mostly from the fact that—though a journal—*RUSH HOUR* is not available by subscription and is published and shelved in bookstores as a book! Ok, so, why a book and not a periodical? Look for the answer under the rubric “economic realities.” It’s simply not economically feasible in today’s marketplace to publish *RUSH HOUR* as a periodical.

Loathe to abandon the idea of a journal altogether and being, after all, an erstwhile librarian, my idea of a happy compromise was to suggest to my publisher that we treat *RUSH HOUR* as a *serial*, numbering each issue sequentially. And now that two issues have been published, you can see—by having a gander at their spines—that this is, indeed, the strategy we have adopted. At the top of each spine is the *RUSH HOUR* logo; immediately beneath that are the words

“VOLUME ONE” and “VOLUME TWO,” respectively. And beneath *that* is the theme of the issue, volume one being “Sin” and volume two being “Bad Boys.”

Simple?

Simple.

And yet the confusion persists.

But this time it’s among the ranks of my fellow reviewers and seems to be a function of the fact that *RUSH HOUR* is, well, unique; it’s *sui generis*; there’s nothing else quite like it. And so some reviewers have misperceived it as being simply another theme-driven anthology or collection of the sort that—pioneered to such good effect by Don Gallo—I’ve previously done myself in such books as *Love and Sex: Ten Stories of Truth* or *Necessary Noise: Stories About Our Families as They Really Are*.

But it *isn’t* the same thing. For one thing, as noted above, *RUSH HOUR* is published periodically, twice a year; for another (and more important) thing, its content is much more eclectic. Like *Granta*, it contains not only original short stories commissioned especially for the issue(s) in which they appear, but it also contains excerpts from forthcoming novels, poems, stories-in-verse, one-act plays, experimental work like “The Silk Ball,” Terry Davis’s haunting story-as-screenplay that appeared in volume one. Then there are cartoons, full-page art, photographs, graphic stories, creative nonfiction, reportage, literary essays—a whole great gallimaufry or olio of genres, forms, styles, voices, and creative what-have-yous. In short, a journal. Have we cleared that up? Well, not quite. There are two other related issues to address: one is *RUSH HOUR*’s intended readership, and two is the simple matter of where you shelve it in your bookstore or library.

Let’s talk about readership first: I’ve already stipulated (see above) that it’s

intended for folks aged roughly sixteen to twenty-four. That’s a little unusual but hardly unprecedented, since this group is part of the newly fashionable “crossover” market that publishers and retailers are hotly courting, though no one in the book world has, as yet, quite figured out how to, as it were, consummate the relationship. The problem is the artificial divide that separates the sixteen- to eighteen-year-old end of the demographic from the nineteen- to twenty-four-year-old one. The former is regarded as young adult and the other, as adult. And the twain simply does not meet on the shelves of libraries or bookstores. And so *RUSH HOUR* (since it’s published by a children’s imprint) typically winds up in the YA section where it goes undiscovered by a large share of its potential audience. Why booksellers adamantly refuse to put *RUSH HOUR* (or any other crossover publication) in BOTH adult and YA sections is a complete mystery.

What about librarians, though?

Surely they—being the answer people—have got it right? Well, if some recent posts on YALSA-BK are any indication, I’m afraid they’re as confused as booksellers are. No one seems to know whether to shelve it with YA or adult or whether to treat it as a book or a journal.

At this point—if I were Kermit—I’d be sighing, “It’s not easy being green.” But I’m not Kermit, I’m only me, so all I can say is, “It’s not easy in today’s market-driven society, which relies on

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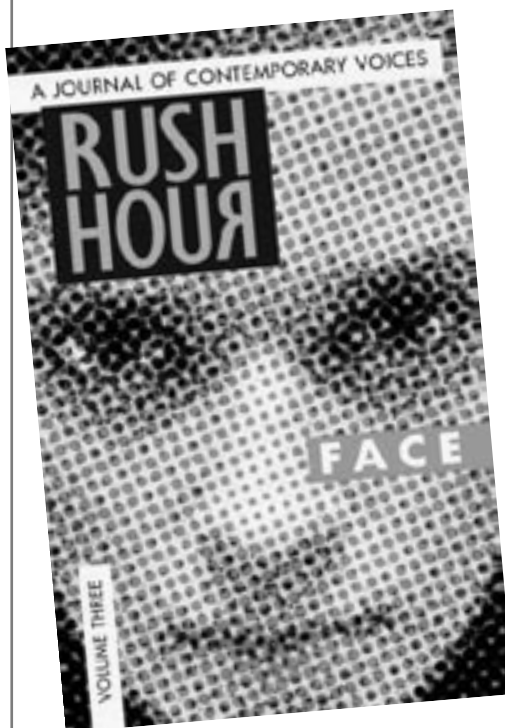
rigid, demographic compartmentalization to purvey goods, merchandise, and, yes, books and journals to consumers, to try to break rules or aspire to be original.” (Yeah, that sounds like long-winded me, doesn’t it?)

But if you care about literature and its potential for making a better world for its readers to inhabit, you’ve got to keep trying.

As far as *RUSH HOUR* is concerned, there are some simple stopgap measures one could take: booksellers could try putting copies in both adult and young adult sections (I don’t think it would be the end of civilization as we know it), and libraries could buy several copies, treating one as a periodical and cataloging the other as a book. Failing that, libraries might want to shelve the current volume with periodicals and, when the next volume arrives, catalog it and move it to the book collection.

But this is short-term stuff. What about the long haul? I think we need to recognize that we have a new category of human being here, as well as a new category of book. As for what we’ve been calling “young adult literature,” we now have three fairly distinct types (though there are the inevitable and awkward overlaps). We have middle school literature for ten- to fourteen-year-olds, we have teen literature for twelve- to eighteen-year-olds, and we have young adult literature for sixteen- to twenty-

four- or twenty-five-year-olds. This need for a new definition of young adult is supported by research that is now revealing that the human brain continues growing until age twenty-four or twenty-five.



Thus, full adulthood doesn’t arrive until the grey matter settles, and that doesn’t take place until the mid-twenties.

Libraries and bookstores need to recognize this by reorganizing their inventory and creating new young adult

sections. This new category (sixteen–twenty-four) needs to be noted, too, by our book review journals. And publishers either need to start publishing books for these various age ranges in simultaneous editions (imagine *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* appearing in both adult and young adult editions at the same time) or publishing books in a newly redefined young adult category.

To get these books into the hands of their intended readers, publishers, booksellers, and librarians are going to have to do more of what is being called guerrilla marketing: placing ads, press releases, and other promos in nontraditional media and venues. And publishers, at least, are going to have to try selling books in places other than bookstores—in places where the sixteen- to twenty-four-year-olds actually shop and hang out.

Geez, I can imagine you saying, all of THIS just so Cart can answer the question—vis-à-vis his precious *RUSH HOUR*—“What the hell is it?”

No, not at all. If *RUSH HOUR* were actually unique, I’d have shut up already. But it’s not. Instead, it’s symptomatic of a huge new trend that’s becoming increasingly manifest in the book world. It’s like the elephant in the living room. We’ve got to start noticing it and talking about it. For we ignore it at our peril. ●

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want to share those experiences with as many people as I can, and the ACL-TLC has allowed me a platform to do this. I have talked to countless people about my involvement in my library and have

sparked those people to crack open a book every once in a while.

I love going to the library. Being on the ACL-TLC has only intensified my love. The ACL-TLC has encouraged me to get more involved in my community and to think of ways to benefit those who

live around me. I enjoy planning activities and then watching as children and teens come to the library and are surprised by what the library offers inside the hallowed doors. I am looking forward to the next three years, anticipating what the library and the ACL-TLC will achieve. ●

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