

Scrutinizing Blurbs: How Book Cover Endorsements Highlight the Centrality of Marketing in Publishing

by
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Abstract

Marketing is a key way publishers ascribe value to books in the literary marketplace. Book blurbs – quoted endorsements printed on book covers – act as promotional copy, influencing pre-publication decision-makers, such as booksellers and publicists. This report argues that blurbs attract scrutiny because they are a visible reminder of the dominance of marketing in contemporary publishing. Firstly, blurb histories illustrate that skepticism around promotion in publishing is not new. Secondly, marketing history looks at the consolidation of power in publishing and longstanding discomfort with the commodification of the book. Thirdly, case studies of blurbs of *The Joy Luck Club* (1989) and *Little Fires Everywhere* (2017) offer insight into the publishing histories and promotional strategies of each book. Lastly, the final section explores opportunities to form community through blurbs, but points to structural limitations that inhibit the sustainability of blurb practices, such as investment in narratives of exceptionalism with marginalized authors.

Keywords: paratexts, blurbs, publishing history, marketing, publishing studies

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Introduction

Marketing permeates all aspects of book publishing – from deciding what books to acquire, to book production, to book reception. Publishers’ marketing strategies signal competence and commitment to other actors in the publishing chain, such as booksellers, and are vital to getting them in alignment to support a book. The predominance of marketing in publishing makes it crucial for publishing students to have a lucid understanding of marketing principles, marketing narratives, and a healthy curiosity about marketing’s functions, impacts, and limitations.

Book blurbs – quoted endorsements from notable authors, public figures, or media outlets listed on book covers – are a ubiquitous yet under-examined aspect of book marketing. Blurbs attract scrutiny and offer rich insight into publishing histories and promotional decisions because they are a visible example of the centrality of marketing in publishing. Blurbs elicit strong opinions because they are a microcosm of core tensions in the publishing industry about the role of commerce in literature. Blurbs trade on name recognition and clout, making them an obvious target for authors and audiences who are frustrated with publishing’s reliance on celebrity and exclusivity to garner attention for books.

This research report looks at the fields of book marketing, linguistics, literature, and critical media studies to investigate how blurbs impact how books are positioned, received, and remembered. Chapter One reviews blurb histories and terminologies to focus on blurbs as promotional endorsements embedded in the materiality of book covers. Chapter Two documents marketing as a source of tension in publishing and situates the intensification of marketing in contemporary publishing. Chapter Three involves case studies of two novels by Asian American women, *The Joy Luck Club* (1989) and *Little Fires Everywhere* (2017), to investigate how blurbs on various editions of each bestselling book illuminate publishing histories and promotional strategies. Chapter Four acknowledges opportunities for blurbs to create community but focuses on blurbs’ limitations, particularly how structural conservatism in publishing reinforces narratives of exceptionalism for successful racialized and underrepresented authors. Lastly, the conclusion offers recommendations for documenting and mapping blurb networks to benefit future research.

Chapter 1.

Blurbs in Theory

1.1. Blurb Histories

Book publicity and promotional tactics have long been integral to publishing, but two events in American literary history popularized the overt promotional practice of printing endorsements directly on the cover of books. These events are crucial to understanding how blurbs became a norm in contemporary publishing and why they are frequently a source of contention amongst publishing professionals, authors, and readers.

Satire, Self-promotion, and the Origin of the Word “Blurb”

American humourist Gelett Burgess coined the term “blurb” during an American Booksellers’ Association dinner in 1907 when he distributed his book *Are You a Bromide?* to guests with a dust jacket that poked fun at the exaggerations publishers went through to promote their books.¹ The dust jacket (see Figure 1) featured the image of a woman, the caricature “Miss Belinda Blurb”, cupping her hand to her mouth to shout. The text beside her notes she is “in the act of blurbing” and the large title at the top proclaims, “YES, this is a ‘BLURB!’”, introducing the new term in quotation marks.²

¹ Merriam-Webster. “The Must-Read, Smash Hit Story of ‘Blurb’”. Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/word-history-blurb-publishing>.

² Gelett Burgess, Jacket of “Are You a Bromide” by Gelett Burgess. Retrieved from *Library of Congress*. <https://www.loc.gov/resource/rbpe.24203600/?sp=1>.

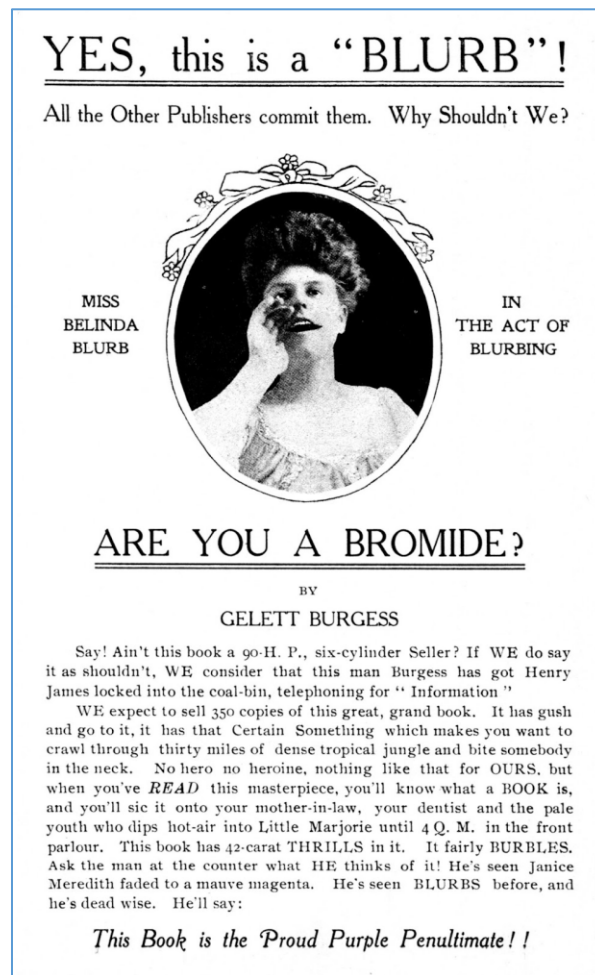


Figure 1. Humourist Gelett Burgess coined the term “blurb” and captured the extremes of hyperbolic promotional text in his mock book cover for *Are You a Bromide?* in 1907. Image accessed from Library of Congress.

Burgess drew attention to how publishers use formulaic hyperbolic language and alliteration to create snappy promotional copy. He emphasized how publishers inflated their copy with promises of life-altering reading experiences with the line “once you’ve *READ* this masterpiece, you’ll know what a BOOK is.”³ Burgess’ cheeky dust jacket was so effective at reproducing the language and tone of book promotion that the term “blurb” was popularized.

In 1914, Burgess included the term in a comedic dictionary, where he defined the blurb as: “Blurb, n. 1. A flamboyant advertisement; an inspired testimonial. 2. Fulsome

³ Gelett Burgess, “Are You a Bromide?”, emphasis added.

praise; a *sound like a publisher*. Blurb, v. To flatter from interested motives; to compliment oneself".⁴ Burgess' critique of publishing norms reveals how authors and publishers are all complicit in creating blurbs, and can have mixed feelings about the conventions of book promotion. While coining the term blurb with *Are You a Bromide?*⁵, Burgess declares "All the Other Publishers *commit* them. Why Shouldn't We?".⁶ This insinuates that blurbing is a common practice, but it is one laced with self-aware unease and guilt. To some, it may even be considered a professional crime to engage in such blatant self-promotion. Ironically, by mocking the excessive praise and self-congratulatory language of book promotion Burgess "helped set a standard in the book industry: apply blurbs to all jackets to sell books."⁷ His satire of book promotion created compelling definitions, memorable examples, and enduring commentary about blurbs.

Private Letters and Public Endorsements

The second event in American literary history that informs the history of blurbs occurred when an author strategically emblazoned private words of encouragement from a more famous author on his own book for promotional purposes. In the 1850s, Walt Whitman sent his book *Leaves of Grass* to the much more established author Ralph Waldo Emerson, eager to solicit feedback.⁸ Emerson wrote a supportive letter to Whitman. Whitman had the letter published in *The New York Tribune* and lifted one line for the spine of the second edition of *Leaves of Grass*: "I Greet You at the Beginning of a Great Career " – RW Emerson (See Figure 2). This is widely regarded as the first blurb

⁴ Gelett Burgess, *Burgess Unabridged: A New Dictionary of Words You Have Always Needed*. Project Gutenberg eBook. <https://gutenberg.org/files/59004/59004-h/59004-h.htm>, emphasis added.

⁵ Burgess' book title *Are You a Bromide?* included another critique of publishing industry promotional norms. In the early 20th century bromide typically referred to a chemical sedative, but Burgess helped popularize an alternate meaning. Meriam Webster's article "The Must-Read, Smash Hit Story of 'Blurb'" details how Burgess characterized a bromide as a "tiresome person" who "goes with the crowd" "may be depended upon to be trite, banal and arbitrary" and "does his thinking by syndicate."

⁶ Gelett Burgess, "Are You a Bromide?"

⁷ *Merriam-Webster*, "The Must-Read, Smash Hit."

⁸ Colin Dwyer, "Forget The Book, Have You Read This Irresistible Story on Blurbs?", *NPR*, September 27, 2015. <https://www.npr.org/2015/09/27/429723002/forget-the-book-have-you-read-this-irresistible-story-on-blurbs>.

in popular and academic sources, as Whitman scholar David Haven Blake confirms in *NPR*'s article on the origin of blurbs.⁹



Figure 2. The second edition of *Leaves of Grass* features what is considered to be the first blurb on its spine: *I Greet You at the Beginning of A Great Career – R.W Emerson*. Image accessed from “Forget The Book, Have You Read This Irresistible Story On Blurbs?” by Colin Dwyer, *NPR*, September 27, 2015.

Literature and linguistics scholar Barbara Grossi recounts in her doctoral dissertation that Whitman extracted words for the blurb without Emerson’s consent.¹⁰ While Whitman worked in the competitive newspaper business and was a savvy self-promoter, modest Emerson took offense to Whitman’s actions.¹¹ What would have once been behind-the-scenes encouragement from one author to another transformed into an explicit promotional tactic, embedded on the external cover of a book. Aside from the ethical issues of publishing private communications without consent, Whitman was

⁹ Colin Dwyer, “Forget The Book.”

¹⁰ Barbara Grossi, “Blurbs in Fiction: A Genre-Based, Linguistic and Semantic Analysis.” (PhD diss., University of Pisa, 2015), 18.

¹¹ Grossi, “Blurbs in Fiction”, 18.

arguably employing his pragmatic understanding of the pressures of an increasingly crowded media landscape to draw attention to his book.

1.2. Paratexts: Processes of Interpretation and Mediation

French literary critic and structural theorist Gérard Genette's work investigating, mapping, and categorising the material that surrounds a published text provides an insightful framework to observe how blurbs function. In his influential book *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, Genette offers foundational terminology and theory for students of literature, publishing, history, and media. Paratexts are "liminal devices and conventions, both within and outside the book, that form part of the complex mediation between the book, author, publisher, and reader."¹² Genette identifies the ephemeral nature of paratexts but most importantly highlights how they reveal relationships between the creators of texts, publishers, media, and audiences.

Genette uses the image of a threshold, where readers can either step inside and engage with the message of the paratext, or turn back.¹³ Crucially, this demonstrates that paratexts can be legible or illegible to different audiences at different times. Someone who knows the history of the Emerson–Whitman exchange or recognizes Emerson's name as a notable American literary figure on the book cover may view *Leaves of Grass* differently than someone who does not.

Peritext: Part of the Book

Paratexts encompass the productions around a text that "surround it, present it, extend it, [and] make it present in the world".¹⁴ Paratexts can be categorized into epitext, elements that are external to the text such as interviews and reviews, and peritext, elements that are embedded in the text such as the book's title, acknowledgements, and blurbs.¹⁵ For example, when Emerson's letter was published in the newspaper it was epitext. One could encounter it and learn about *Leaves of Grass* without ever picking up

¹² Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. Jane E Lewin (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1997), xv.

¹³ Genette, *Paratexts*, 2.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

the book. However, when Emerson's words became etched on the cover of *Leaves of Grass* they became peritext, materially part of the book. Blurbs are peritext.

Analysis of a book's peritext provides insight into publishing decisions because, as Genette notes, peritext is ultimately the responsibility of the publisher.¹⁶ Publishers use peritext to influence how people will interact with a book. Genette calls prospective readers who receive peritextual messages "audiences" and "publics", regularly commenting on the need to see these as plural rather than singular entities.¹⁷ Genette highlights the role of publishing professionals who actively participate in circulating a book – such as agents, booksellers, and critics – as key intermediaries between a book and its potential readers.¹⁸

The study of paratexts is a study of context and communication. Genette calls paratexts an "illocutionary force" that communicate information and make an intention or interpretation by the author and/or publisher known.¹⁹ In other words, they function not just to communicate information, but to compel action.²⁰ They can give advice, permission, or commands. Genette remarks that paratexts create "a zone not only of transition but also of *transaction*."²¹ This highlights how peritexts contribute to the packaging of the book for commercial purposes and supports viewing blurbs as promotional language.

1.3. Studying the Blurb as "Cultural Artefact"²²

Genette's theory provides a framework to study blurbs as communications devices. Building off this, linguistics scholar Helen Basturkmen argues that blurbs are a rich source of information about audiences and societies. She observes that "as well as being a rather superficial and blatant form of promotion...*the blurb represents a cultural*

¹⁶ Ibid., 16.

¹⁷ Ibid., 7.

¹⁸ Ibid., 75.

¹⁹ Ibid., 10.

²⁰ Ibid., 9.

²¹ Ibid., 2. Original emphasis.

²² Helen Basturkmen, "Back Cover Blurbs: Puff Pieces and Windows on Cultural Values," in *Academic Evaluation: Review Genres in University Settings*, edited by Ken Hyland and Giuliana Dianai (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 68.

artefact and is of interest...as a source of data by which to investigate the norms and values of the intended readership, the discourse community targeted by the work.”²³ In other words, blurbs can illuminate *who* publishers are promoting a book to and *how* publishers perceive the needs of that particular audience.

When we come to understand blurbs as cultural artifacts, they become a crucial entry point and source material for studying marketing and publishing histories. As with all texts, blurbs are not created in a vacuum but are shaped by socio-cultural and economic contexts. As the case studies in Chapter Three will demonstrate, a close-reading of blurbs can indicate the resources publishers commit to a book, the target audience for the book, and the norms of the publishing landscape at a particular time.

1.4. Variation in Blurb Terminology and Location

A thorough review of blurb histories, terminology, and scholarship firmly establishes that blurbs are a ubiquitous promotional tool in the publishing industry. Why then, is it common to encounter varied usage of the word “blurb” in academic and professional publishing spaces? It may seem like discussions of blurb definitions are circuitous, but the frequency in which “blurb” is used interchangeably and unevenly to refer to different types of publishing copy – without reference to other possible meanings – makes it a pertinent subject to clarify.

Most dictionary definitions focus on a blurb’s structural brevity and persuasive purpose.²⁴ Merriam Webster describes the blurb as “a short publicity notice (as on a book jacket).”²⁵ In *How to Market Books*, publishing scholar Alison Baverstock uses “cover blurb” as an overarching term for *any* cover copy that is written by marketing teams. This is because, in Britain where several influential marketing in publishing scholars such as Baverstock reside, blurb conventionally means a “descriptive or commendatory paragraph.”²⁶ “Puff”, a term that predates the word “blurb”, is the

²³ Basturkmen, “Back Cover Blurbs”, 68. Emphasis added.

²⁴ Grossi, “Blurbs in Fiction,” 18.

²⁵ *Merriam-Webster Online*, s.v. “blurb, *n.*,” accessed February 2022, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/blurb>.

²⁶ *OED Online*, s.v. “blurb, *n.*,” accessed March 2021, <https://www-oed-com.proxy.lib.sfu.ca/view/Entry/20675?redirectedFrom=blurb>.

common parlance for quoted endorsements on book covers in British literary, publishing, and media spaces.²⁷

“Puffery” is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as “inflated or *unmerited* praise or commendation; an extravagantly laudatory advertisement or review.”²⁸ Does this not sound like Burgess’ comic definition of the blurb? While Burgess poked fun at promotional conventions, the term “puff” suggests a more disparaging critique.²⁹ It says promotional praise is not just inflated, but can be undeserving and even duplicitous. The ubiquitous but uneven usage of the term “blurb” in both North American and British publishing is a topic that merits further study.

How do Publishers Obtain Blurbs?

When marketing teams brainstorm potential authors and media contacts from whom to solicit pre-publication blurbs, they are not asking these time-starved people to write plot summaries.³⁰ They are asking influential people to read the book at hand and write a brief statement of praise that will be attributed to them in public. *The Wall Street Journal* culture editor Cody Delistraty explains that “the author, editor and sometimes the agent will share the book, often at the manuscript stage, with a targeted list of notable authors, in the hope that they will lend a few kind words – and, crucially, their name – to

²⁷ Ross Wilson, “On the Eve of the Booker Prize a Sideways Look at the Literary Puff”, University of Cambridge, accessed January 4, 2022, <https://www.cam.ac.uk/research/features/on-the-eve-of-the-booker-prize-a-sideways-look-at-the-literary-puff>.

²⁸ OED *Online*, s.v. “puffery, *n.*,” accessed February 2022. <https://www-oed-com.proxy.lib.sfu.ca/view/Entry/154189?redirectedFrom=puffery#eid>, emphasis added.

²⁹ “Puff” also evokes the journalistic term “puff piece”, which *Keywords in News and Journalism Studies* defines as “a derisory term for a news report or column that provides primarily positive publicity for an individual, product or services” that “downplays or ignores existing negative evidence.” Barbie Zelizer and Stuart Allan. *Keywords in News and Journalism Studies*, (Berkshire: McGraw-Hill Education, 2010), 127.

³⁰ Baverstock indicates this summary style copy is the responsibility of the marketing and publicity department. In 2020/2021 Masters of Publishing course work, it was common for industry guests to note that these sorts of writing tasks were increasingly outsourced to contract workers, rather than done in house. Additionally, as a publishing intern I have witnessed other student interns get asked to write summary copy that was used for both epitext (catalogue copy) and peritext (cover copy) interchangeably and signed off on by the publisher.

the work.”³¹ This further confirms that blurbs are the responsibility of publishers, and are considered from the early stages in the production lifecycle of a book.

Blurbs can be solicited and they can also be repurposed from other media. Media and literature scholar Kate Douglas notes how marketing teams habitually examine book reviews and use them as “extraction zones” to pull snippets of text to repurpose as blurbs.³² She observes that the shrinking media real-estate for dedicated book reviews (as coverage of books gets consolidated into publicity features rather than specialist literary criticism) means reviews have become more condensed and commercial, with lines primed for repurposing as blurbs.³³ Douglas argues that since blurbs are part of the book itself, “they are perhaps the only reviews that are guaranteed to be read by the reader.”³⁴ As peritext, blurbs have more potential to be read than epitextual reviews, but as Genette’s theory details, peritext is a liminal space, a threshold that can be encountered and accepted *or* refused. Thus, the legibility of blurbs as reviews is not fixed, nor guaranteed.

Reviewing the slippery terminology around blurbs highlights the location of blurbs, attitudes that surround them, and how they are obtained by publishers. In 2015, NPR reporter Colin Dwyer observed that “for such a curious word, the term ‘blurb’ has amassed several meanings in the decades since it worked its way into our vocabulary but lately it has referred to just one thing: a *bylined endorsement* from a fellow writer — or celebrity — that sings the praises of a book’s author right on the cover of their book.”³⁵ In line with this popular usage of the term, blurbs as endorsements are the primary focus of this report.

³¹ Cody Delistraty, “Is It Time to Kill the Book Blurb?”, *NPR*, February 24, 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/book-blurbs-dead-successful-publishing-11614173765>.

³² Kate Douglas, “‘Blurbing’ Biographical: Authorship and Autobiography,” *Biography* 24, no. 4 (2001): 808.

³³ Laurence Hughes, “Blurb Service”, *Publishers Weekly*, August 25, 2008, <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/columns-and-blogs/soapbox/article/9357-blurb-service.html>.

³⁴ Douglas, “‘Blurbing’ Biographical”, 809.

³⁵ Colin Dwyer, “Forget The Book.” emphasis added.

1.5. Blurbs as Endorsements

Advanced quotes from notable readers and media outlets provide insight into behind-the-scenes power networks in publishing. Publishers seek endorsements from influential people or choose excerpts of prestigious reviews (such as *The New York Times*) that provide an air of authority and legitimacy. As such, these blurbs demonstrate that publishing is a business, with partnerships and decision-makers.

Reader expectations or perceptions that blurbs should be book reviews unencumbered by commercial motives contributes to debates about the validity of blurbs. Linguistics scholar Maria-Lluïsa Gea-Valor makes the insightful observation that while “blurbs can be said to straddle the book review and the advertisement...their persuasive nature outweighs their surface appearance as book reviews.”³⁶ Blurbs as endorsements work to convince people that a book is worthy of their attention, time, and money – the hallmarks of effective marketing.

³⁶ Maria-Lluïsa Gea-Valor, “Advertising Books: A Linguistic Analysis of Blurbs.” *Ibérica* 10 (2005): 45.

Chapter 2.

Marketing in Publishing

Blurbs have a promotional function and therefore provide insight into marketing practices within publishing. Baverstock's practical marketing guide begins with a common refrain one hears in publishing: "publishing companies used to be run by editors; today they are run by marketers."³⁷ This chapter traces the historical and economic contexts that contributed to the intensification of marketing's dominance in publishing. It details how marketing is not a separate, add-on process when a book is released into the world, but something that permeates every stage of the publishing cycle.

2.1. What is Marketing?

It can be challenging for students to land on a clear definition of marketing that reflects the broad array of activities marketing encompasses. Marketing in publishing scholar Claire Squires references the following Charter Institute of Marketing definition: "Marketing is the management process responsible for identifying, anticipating and satisfying customer requirement profitability."³⁸ At its core marketing is about identifying the needs, motivations, and behaviours of a target audience and providing that audience with value via a product, service, or experience.³⁹

³⁷ Alison Baverstock, *How to Market Books: The Essential Guide to Maximizing Profit and Exploiting All Channels to Market*. 4th ed. (London: Kogan Page, 2008), 4.

³⁸ Claire Squires, *Marketing Literature: The Making of Contemporary Writing in Britain* (Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), 51.

³⁹ In recent years, some marketers have been keen to shift away from the more conservative, transactional business language of profitability to create definitions that focus on marketing as a means for effective communication and organization of stakeholders to achieve strategic goals. The most recent American Marketing Association demonstrates this: "Marketing is the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large. (Approved 2017)" American Marketing Association "Definitions of Marketing." Accessed January 4, 2022. <https://www.ama.org/the-definition-of-marketing-what-is-marketing/>.

2.2. Book as Commodity: Suspicion Towards Marketing

Debates about the legitimacy of marketing in publishing are perennial, but cynicism and scepticism regarding the role of marketing in publishing stems back to discomfort with treating the book as a commodity. Media and cultural studies scholar Nicole Matthews claims that promotional activities are inherently fraught in publishing due to “the *perception* of the book trade as less commercial than other industries.”⁴⁰ She notes that desires to distance publishing from marketing stem from “ahistorical longings for times gone by where more valorized, romanticised, and prestige aspects of publishing” led the industry and were separate from commerce.⁴¹ In reality, marketing and publishing have been intertwined for as long as books have been sold.

Squires argues that marketing is a source of tension in publishing because “publishers’ and retailers’ promotional activities [are] frequently taken both to symbolise and actualise the shifting relationship of art to business.”⁴² Because blurbs are peritext, baked into the materiality of the book, they are an inescapable reminder of marketing in publishing. Translation scholar Susan Pickford says the cover blurb “represents a key element in the process of the desacralisation of the book” and “highlights the book’s status as a commodity.”⁴³ There should be room to critique the hyper-commodification of the book under the falsely created scarcity of time, attention, and resources of late-stage capitalism without losing sight of the functions of marketing practices in the literary marketplace. Overly disparaging attitudes towards marketing tend to obscure the realities of the contemporary literary marketplace. For example, continuing to be invested in a strict art/culture vs commerce binary feeds a misleading narrative that “good” art should organically reach its audience by virtue alone. This also insinuates a

⁴⁰ Nicole Matthews, “Introduction” in *Judging a Book By Its Cover*, eds. Nicole Matthews and Nickianne Moody, (Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2007), xviii. Emphasis added.

⁴¹ Matthews. “Introduction”, xviii.

⁴² Squires, *Marketing Literature*, 40.

⁴³ Susan Pickford. “Jerome K. Jerome and the Paratextual Staging of Anti-elitism.” In *Judging a Book By Its Cover*, eds. Nicole Matthews and Nickianne Moody, (Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2007), 88.

meritocracy where “good” authors are rewarded on pure talent and that it is somehow unbecoming for authors to seek consistent and adequate compensation for their work.⁴⁴

2.3. How Did Marketing Become So Dominant in Publishing?

Since the 1980s the role of marketing has increased dramatically in publishing, which Squires attributes to corporate takeovers of publishing houses, the emergence of new information technologies, and competition from other leisure media industries.⁴⁵ Reviewing the economic and social histories of this formative time illuminates both the structural realities of the changing literary marketplace and the logics that inform marketing decisions past and present.

The social conservatism of the 1980s and the normalization of neoliberal ideologies as the best and only way to govern set the scene for the consolidation of the publishing industry into a business and finance-oriented book market. The 1980s marked the culmination of several decades of mergers and acquisitions that concentrated power and capital – a trend that marketing scholar Albert Greco says fundamentally changed the American publishing landscape.⁴⁶

Squires outlines how publishers were subsumed into multimedia conglomerates with far-reaching business interests in newspapers, magazines, film, TV, radio, and emerging communication technologies.⁴⁷ She states a key implication for publishers was access to far greater financial resources. However, while the number of books published per year continued to increase exponentially, saturating an already crowded market, big publishers concentrated financial resources and sales efforts towards fewer books.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Jenny Odell’s 2019 book *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy* and conversations between popular media and journalism podcast *You’re Wrong About* hosts Sarah Marshall and Michael Hobbes (2018-2021) influenced this thinking.

⁴⁵ Squires, *Marketing Literature*, 1.

⁴⁶ Albert N. Greco, “Mergers and Acquisitions in the US Book Industry, 1960-1989.” in *International Book Publishing: An Encyclopedia*, eds. Philip Altbach and Edith S. Hoshino (New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1995), 229-242.

⁴⁷ Squires, *Marketing Literature*, 24.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 26.

Cultural analytics scholar Richard Jean So observes that the impact throughout the publishing industry was that “editors were under severe pressure to acquire and promote bestsellers.”⁴⁹ In fact, publishing became *reliant* on best-sellers. At the production level, books began to be accepted or rejected by publishing houses based on their “marketability” and at a sales level booksellers selected titles they had confidence would be supported by significant marketing budgets.⁵⁰

2.4. Cross-promotion and Film Tie-Ins

Connection to multimedia corporations enabled publishers to expand their readership to broader audiences interested in different media formats.⁵¹ In their honours thesis Maro Asadoorian notes that the “pursuit of the big book” was coupled with publishers making decisions to acquire book manuscripts based on their film and TV rights potential.⁵² For publishers, cross-promoting their books to film and TV audiences meant lucrative opportunities to visually market their books and tap into established media channels.

Literature scholar Rebecca Mitchell identifies movie tie-in covers as a primary tool of cross-promotion in publishing.⁵³ The covers of tie-in editions show film stills (often repurposed film posters) with stickers or text declaring that the book is associated with a film. Book publishing consultant Valerie Peterson explains that tie-in editions often display images of movie stars, and are “re-jacketed to reflect the marketing campaign of the related film or TV show” to capitalize on celebrity and publicity (See Chapter Three case studies for examples).⁵⁴

⁴⁹ Richard Jean So, *Redlining Culture: A Data History of Racial Inequality and Postwar Fiction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021), 8.

⁵⁰ Maro Asadoorian, “Where Did All These Books Come From?” (Hons. Thesis, Colby College, 2007), 76.

⁵¹ Squires, *Marketing Literature*, 21.

⁵² Asadoorian, “Where Did All These Books Come From?”, 60.

⁵³ Rebecca Mitchell, “‘Now a Major Motion Picture’: The Delicate Business of Selling Literature through Contemporary Cinema.” In *Judging a Book By Its Cover*, eds. Nicole Matthews and Nickianne Moody, (Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2007), 108.

⁵⁴ Valerie Peterson, “The Power of Marketing Synergy for Promotional Media Tie-Ins”, *The Balance Careers*, April 19, 2019, <https://www.thebalancecareers.com/movie-and-tv-tie-ins-marketing-synergy-and-book-sales-2800004>.

Publishers like tie-ins because they keep books top of mind for consumers. Crucially, tie-ins can contribute to increased and prolonged book sales.⁵⁵ Mitchell warns tie-in covers can alienate avid readers or loyal fans of a book, but these editions are not for dedicated readers.⁵⁶ Tie-ins are a marketing strategy designed to intentionally target and attract new readers.

2.5. Who are the Audiences for Blurbs?

The primary audience for blurbs is publishing industry and book professionals, such as agents, editors, publishers, booksellers, and librarians. In his NPR feature on blurbs, Dwyer explains: “The blurb isn't exactly meant for readers — at least, not entirely. By the time a blurb gets to the reader, by the time it's resting on a book in a display, it has already done most of the work it's supposed to do.”⁵⁷ While blurbs have multiple audiences and can influence consumer audiences directly, their key function is to alert professional audiences that the book at hand has connections to successful, relevant authors or media outlets, as well as a marketing team with a strong sense of how to market the book.

Baverstock argues that having an effective marketing plan has become instrumental to acquiring as well as selling books.⁵⁸ Marketing resources and communications, such as securing a blurb for promotional use, signal competence and commitment to other actors in the publishing chain, vital to getting them in alignment to support a book. Marketers strategically focus their efforts on identifying (or creating) advocates for their products so they can capitalize on the access and influence such advocates have in relation to their target audience. Squires illustrates this by highlighting the importance of seeking out opinion formers whose cultural authority makes their book recommendations powerful.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ Peterson, “The Power of Marketing”.

⁵⁶ Mitchell, “Now a Major Motion Picture”, 109.

⁵⁷ Dwyer, “Forget The Book.”

⁵⁸ Baverstock, *How to Market Books*, 2.

⁵⁹ Squires, *Marketing Literature*, 65.

Activating Word-of-Mouth

Word-of-mouth recommendations are valuable to marketers because people are more likely to trust recommendations from people they know and trust.⁶⁰ Word-of-mouth marketing harnesses personal connections and social networks to create conversations around a product that influence purchasing decisions, instead of directly targeting consumers with a sales pitch.

Squires interviews publishing professionals who claim word-of-mouth is “a process that is like alchemy” and is vital to the creation of bestsellers.⁶¹ While publishers do not have complete control over word-of-mouth, Squires takes pains to demystify the process. In her case study about *Bridget Jones Diary*, and the industry and media speculation that surrounded it, Squires clarifies a “professionally-instituted word-of-mouth chain” contributed to sustained media attention and commercial success.⁶² Word-of-mouth, recommendations, and endorsements all reveal the apparatuses of publishing’s business decisions, access to media, and economic resources. Media narratives about successful books can often focus on inexplicable, runaway success as if a book has a life of its own. Squires reminds students of publishing that the “mechanisms of ‘hype’” are more often than not triggered by money.⁶³

Without transparency about the central role of marketing in publishing books, it is easy to fall foul of what Squires calls the “myth of a book appealing directly to its readers.... a democratic vision, where the people come to determine cultural success, seemingly without the interventions of the industry or media.”⁶⁴ Part of the project of scrutinizing blurbs is making publishing industry and media relationships, power, and decision-making more visible. Blurbs are an entry point to viewing how industry and media actions contribute to the visibility of books in a crowded literary marketplace. In a sense, blurbs can be viewed as a nexus of both industry and consumer conversations about a book. As peritext, they are material evidence of professional conversations and

⁶⁰ “21 User-Generated Content Stats You Need to Know,” CrowdRiff, Accessed January 4, 2022, <https://crowdriff.com/resources/blog/21-user-generated-content-stats-you-need-to-know>.

⁶¹ Squires, *Marketing Literature*, 64.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 155.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 139.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 114.

commitments that have occurred up to that point, and they can also be a catalyst for myriad unseen conversations as a book circulates in the world.

Chapter 3.

Case Studies of Blurbs in Action: *The Joy Luck Club* (1989) and *Little Fires Everywhere* (2017)

The Joy Luck Club and *Little Fires Everywhere* are contemporary novels by Asian American women that are critically and commercially acclaimed for evocative storytelling and insightful commentary about family, legacy, culture, and community dynamics. They are exciting novels to analyze blurbs in action because both books received heightened attention for being publishing phenomena, leaving significant evidence about the publishing histories of the books and how the publishing industry operates.

The Joy Luck Club was first published in 1989 amidst major change in the publishing industry, namely the culmination of decades of business mergers into multi-media conglomerates leading to a focus on creating blockbuster hits.⁶⁵ The publishing industry and media treated Amy Tan as the spokesperson for Asian American literature, and for many years her hyper-visible success attracted mixed feelings amongst Asian American readers, and discomfort for Tan herself.⁶⁶ In a 30-year retrospective on the publication of *The Joy Luck Club* Tan addresses that readers often assume the novel is memoir rather than fiction, a typically sexist conflation of craft and biography that can be amplified by narrow views of race.⁶⁷

Little Fires Everywhere was first published in 2017 during a time of ubiquitous social media marketing and regular access to authors' personalities and opinions, trends

⁶⁵ Claire Squires, "The Global Market 1970-2015: Consumers" In *A Companion to the History of the Book*, eds. Simon Eliot and Jonathan Rose. John Wiley & Sons (2020): 601.

⁶⁶ Lena Felton, "Celeste Ng Called Amy Tan. We Listened In." *The Lily*, May 2, 2019. <https://www.thelily.com/celeste-ng-called-amy-tan-we-listened-in/>

⁶⁷ Amy Tan, "Amy Tan Reflects on 30 Years Since *The Joy Luck Club*." *LiteraryHub*, April 23, 2019. <https://lithub.com/amy-tan-reflects-on-30-years-since-the-joy-luck-club/>. In this piece, Tan wryly notes readers often conflate her life with her fiction, assuming she is a mother and that she grew up in Chinatown, neither which are true. Readers of the piece may also observe the article is a very subtle piece of publisher sponsored content for the 30th Anniversary Edition of *The Joy Luck Club* (see the "via Penguin Books" button above the title).

that prominent publishing business strategist Jane Friedman notes on her blog.⁶⁸ A key difference between publishing a book in 1989 and 2017 is that conversations about books can be more instantaneous, varied, and decentralized as readers from all over the world contribute to discourse online. Another difference is that, while publishing and media positioned *The Joy Luck Club* as a distinct non-American cultural story in ways some Asian American readers regarded as Orientalist and othering, *Little Fires Everywhere* was positioned as a story that tapped into the zeitgeist of middle-America.⁶⁹

These case studies offer analysis of blurbs as inroads to analyze the publishing histories and promotional strategies employed for various editions of each book, namely the privilege of money to unlock marketing support, the role of multimedia cross-over potential, and the use of name recognition. It should not take away from the talent of individual authors nor readers' attachment to books to analyze the vast publishing and marketing resources that are required to create bestsellers. In fact, it is important to unpick bestsellers from narratives of happenstance to understand and critique how marketing operates in publishing.

3.1. Book Covers and Bestsellers

In *Judging a Book by its Cover*, Matthews observes that “book jackets are a key conduit through which negotiations take place between authors, the book trade and readers.”⁷⁰ Analyzing the composition and location of blurbs on book covers provides a material snapshot of the historical moment in which a book was published. Baverstock, Matthews, and Squires all argue that design is a key peritextual component of marketing books, particularly when creating emotional connections to a target audience and visual

⁶⁸ Jane Friedman, “Yes, Social Media Can Sell Books. But Not If Publishers Sit on Their Hands, December 8, 2021, <https://www.janefriedman.com/yes-social-media-can-sell-books-but-not-if-publishers-sit-on-their-hands/>.

⁶⁹ Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong, “Sugar Sisterhood”: Situating the Amy Tan phenomenon,” in *Ethnic Canon: Histories, Institutions, and Interventions*, ed. David Palumbo-Liu (University of Minnesota Press, 1995): 181. See Tan and Ng’s conversation about the legacy of *The Joy Luck Club* and their reflections on their experiences as Asian American women in the publishing industry here: <https://www.thelily.com/celeste-ng-called-amy-tan-we-listened-in/>.

⁷⁰ Matthews, “Introduction” xi.

association with similar books.⁷¹ As such, book designers play an important role in the styling and location of blurbs.

Squires maintains that publishing historians typically conduct case studies on bestselling books as they can give a more comprehensive snapshot of the literary marketplace and how it functions in relation to society.⁷² Analyzing blurbs on the original edition of bestselling books like *The Joy Luck Club* and *Little Fires Everywhere* and comparing blurbs on subsequent editions of each book can illuminate how marketing played a role in the trajectory of each book. The case studies in this report focus on English-language editions published in the United States. (See Appendix on page 65 for a full transcription of blurbs from all editions discussed in the case studies.)

3.2. Case Study #1: Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club*

This case study looks at three editions of *The Joy Luck Club*: the original 1989 hardcover, the 1993 film tie-in paperback edition, and the 2019 30th anniversary paperback edition. Before analyzing each book’s blurbs and the promotional strategies they reveal, it is important to outline *The Joy Luck Club*’s publishing history.

The Stuff of “Publishing Legend”⁷³: Agent, Advance, and Anticipation

The publishing history of *The Joy Luck Club* is marked by the story of a persistent book agent, a note-worthy advance, and building anticipation from industry insiders. In 1989, Publishers Weekly editor Gayle Feldman explained how agent Sandra Dijkstra’s vision and tenacity helped secure the resources that would set the book on course to becoming a bestseller.⁷⁴ Dijkstra pitched the book to publishers with firm financial goals with the concern that “if the publisher didn’t pay enough, the book

⁷¹ Baverstock, *How to Market Books*, 11; Matthews, “Introduction”, xix; Squires, *Marketing Literature*, 2, 75, 88.

⁷² Squires, *Marketing Literature*, 106.

⁷³ Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong, “Sugar Sisterhood”: Situating the Amy Tan phenomenon,” in *Ethnic Canon: Histories, Institutions, and Interventions*, ed. David Palumbo-Liu (University of Minnesota Press, 1995): 174.

⁷⁴ Gayle Feldman, “The Making of Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club*,” Publishers Weekly, July 7, 1989, <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/authors/profiles/article/58657-the-making-of-the-joy-luck-club.html>.

wouldn't get the right treatment."⁷⁵ When Putnam & Sons agreed to a \$50,000 advance, a significant sum for a first-time author, it sent ripple effects through the publishing industry.⁷⁶

Squires concludes her own case studies by observing how a "novel's text can be an allegory for its own marketing context".⁷⁷ At the time of publication, the publishing industry was invested in *The Joy Luck Club's* success as a story of "joy, luck, and magic."⁷⁸ Distinguished Asian American Studies scholar Sau-ling Cynthia Wong argues that the "elusive element, 'timing' or 'luck', usually summoned to explain cases of overnight celebrity, must be restored to historicity."⁷⁹ While narratives of publishing as a mysterious world may create good headlines, Wong draws attention back to how people, such as book agents brokering financial deals, create successful books.

3.3. *The Joy Luck Club* 1989 US Hardcover

The 1989 front panel of *The Joy Luck Club* features the author's name and book title set against a jacket design that invokes Chinese ceramics or tapestries (See Figure 3). The lack of blurbs or additional copy makes the cover feel important and intriguing. Flip the book over and the back panel features three author blurbs and one trade publication blurb (See Figure 4). To give an indication of the immediacy of *The Joy Luck Club's* success, this hardcover edition was reprinted 27 times and sold 275,000 copies.⁸⁰

⁷⁵ Feldman, "The Making of Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*"

⁷⁶ Calculating for inflation, this is the equivalent of \$113,366 in 2022. <https://www.usinflationcalculator.com/>.

⁷⁷ Squires, *Marketing Literature*, 121.

⁷⁸ Feldman, "The Making of Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*."

⁷⁹ Wong, "Sugar Sisterhood", 175.

⁸⁰ Wong, "Sugar Sisterhood", 174. Wong pulls the 275,000 sales figure from the 1991 *Time* article "Fresh Voices Above the Noisy Din" but neither source identifies the time that elapsed for these sales to take place. *The Joy Luck Club* was first published in 1989 and more lucrative hardcover editions are usually sold in the first year of a book's initial release, so one can insinuate these sales happened over the course of a year. Trade publications like *Publishers Weekly* regularly cite the 275,000-hardcover sales figure as an indication of the overwhelming commercial success of the book.

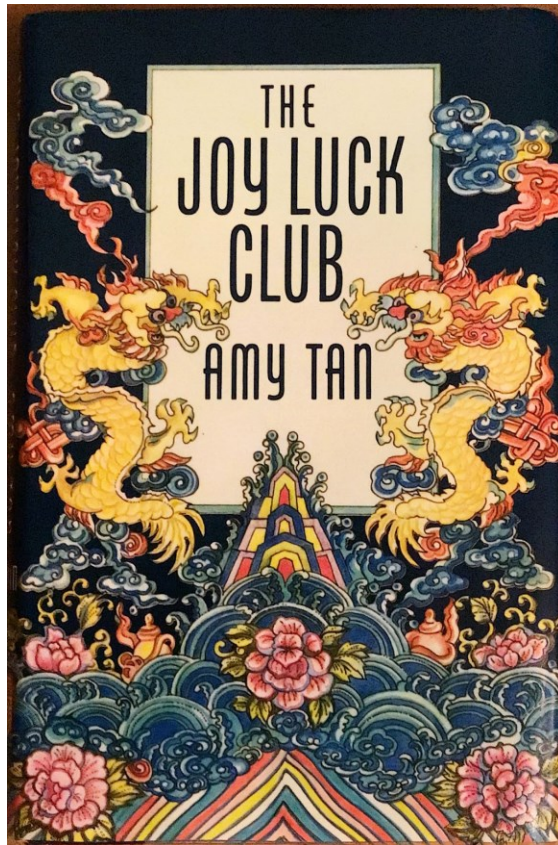


Figure 3. *The Joy Luck Club* 1989 original hardcover dust jacket front panel. Note the lack of blurbs. Amy Tan, *The Joy Luck Club*. New York: G.P Putnam's Sons, 1989.

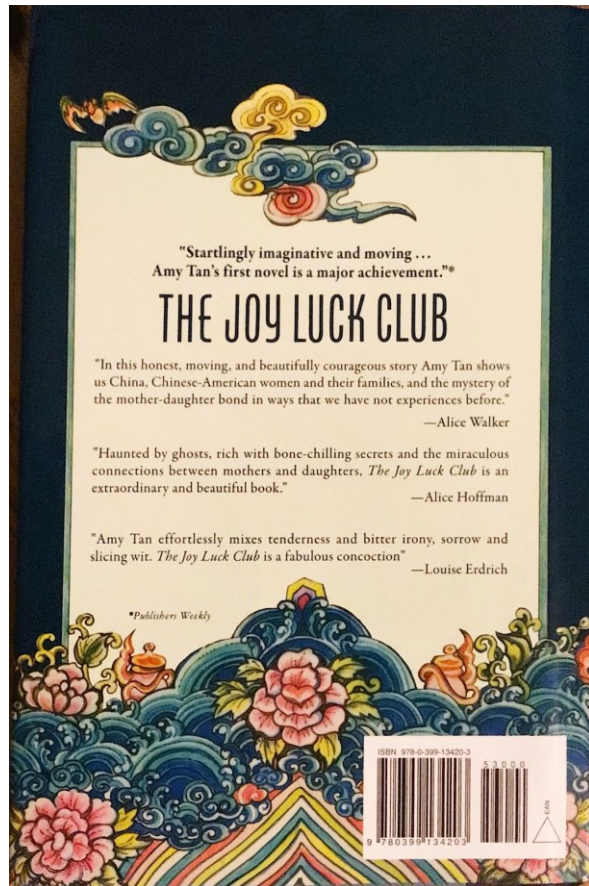


Figure 4. *The Joy Luck Club* 1989 original hardcover dust jacket back panel featuring prestigious blurbs from authors Alice Walker, Alice Hoffman, and Louise Erdrich. Amy Tan, *The Joy Luck Club*. New York: G.P Putnam’s Sons, 1989.

Promotional Strategy: Prestige Author Endorsements

Wong highlights how three “enthusiastic blurbs” from respected, commercially-successful female authors, Alice Walker, Alice Hoffman, and Louise Erdrich, created a striking mix of endorsements for *The Joy Luck Club* that were bolstered by post-publication reviews.⁸¹ At the time of publication, each woman had spent the better part of the decade cementing formidable reputations for the quality of their craftsmanship as well as gaining critical and commercial success. Feldman notes that concerted efforts to secure advanced praise for *The Joy Luck Club* were part of Putnam’s pre-publication strategy.⁸² In fact, in some rare insight into epitextual marketing materials, Feldman

⁸¹ Wong, “Sugar Sisterhood”, 174.

⁸² Feldman, *The Making of Amy Tan’s The Joy Luck Club*.

notes the publisher sent postcards with Walker's blurb on them with advanced reading copies of the book to influential industry insiders.⁸³ This shows blurbs were a critical tactic to create anticipation for *The Joy Luck Club* within the literary world.

Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982) was a cultural touchstone of the 1980s. With it, Walker won the National Book Award and was the first Black woman to win the Pulitzer Prize.⁸⁴ In a 1985 article about the Spielberg blockbuster adaptation of the novel, *Publishers Weekly* highlights the sales of the novel, with over 1 million paperback copies sold and a further 1 million copies of a new mass market paperback to be released alongside the film.⁸⁵ This context informs the significance of Walker's blurb on *The Joy Luck Club* in 1989 as a gesture towards potential critical and commercial success.

Walker says that Tan "shows us China, Chinese-American women and their families, and the mystery of the mother-daughter bond in ways that we have not experienced before." Walker's prominence as a Black women writer engaging in the complexities of interpersonal and historical violence and trauma, lends weight to her testimony of Tan's culturally-specific stories at a time when few Asian American women were published.

Hoffman, pre-*Practical Magic* fame but with a reputation for vivid storytelling, also notes the mother-daughter connection. She adds that *The Joy Luck Club* is "haunted by ghosts, rich with bone-chilling secrets", words that provide an air of mystery and anticipation. Notably, Hoffman was published by Putnam at the time which would likely have made securing a blurb for an exciting debut a professional courtesy that could evolve into mutually beneficial publicity if the book was a hit.

Anishinaabe author Erdrich's blurb says Tan "effortlessly mixes tenderness and bitter irony, sorrow and slicing wit" and calls *The Joy Luck Club* "a fabulous concoction." Erdrich's award-winning *Love Medicine* (1984) tells the stories of Indigenous families,

⁸³ Ibid. This also shows how blurbs can migrate location and simultaneously be peritextual and epitextual, on book covers *and* on external marketing materials. This is prevalent in contemporary digital marketing where blurbs are often used for banner ads and social media posts.

⁸⁴ Emily Temple, "A Century of Reading: The 10 Books That Defined the 1980s." *Literary Hub*, October 25, 2018, <https://lithub.com/a-century-of-reading-the-10-books-that-defined-the-1980s/>.

⁸⁵ William Goldstein, "The Story Behind the Movie: Alice Walker on the Set of *The Color Purple*," *Publishers Weekly*, September 6, 1985.

with historical vignettes told by different characters.⁸⁶ The stylistic and thematic similarities between Erdrich and Tan's work were noted by critics at the time, and the presence of Erdrich's blurb helps cement this in the mind of readers.⁸⁷

Lastly, *Publisher's Weekly* provides a layer of industry approval and announces *Joy Luck Club* as a debut novel with the blurb: "Startlingly imaginative and moving...Amy Tan's first novel is a major achievement." It is easy to see how the combined effect of the four blurbs would help booksellers with handselling, show appealing themes for book clubs, and catalyze word-of-mouth recommendations amongst social groups.

⁸⁶ In her forward for the 30th anniversary edition of *Joy Luck Club*, Tan recalls reading *Love Medicine* prior to writing *Joy Luck Club*. She says it was hugely inspirational and remains one of her favourite books. There is not enough public information available to know how Erdrich's blurb was procured, but knowing Tan's fondness for Erdrich's writing makes it a moving peritextual connection between the two authors.

⁸⁷ Feldman, "The Making of Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*."

3.4. *The Joy Luck Club* 1993 US Film Tie-In Edition

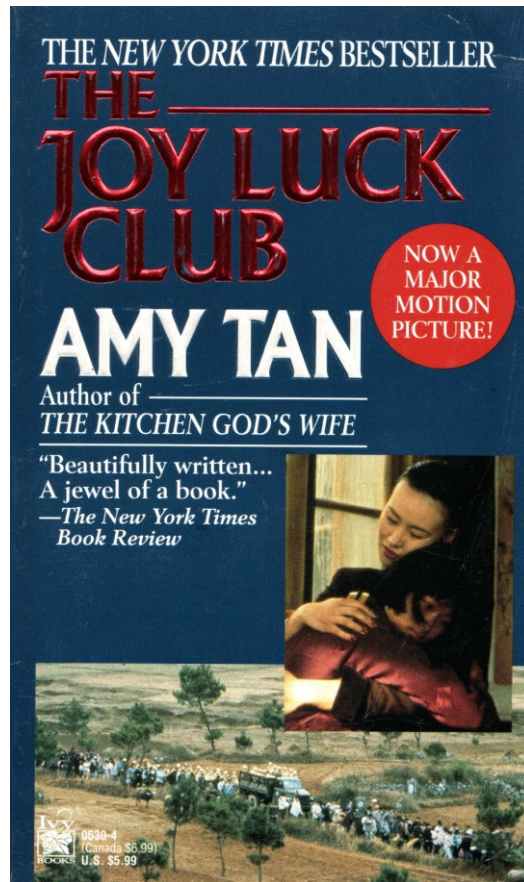


Figure 5. *The Joy Luck Club* 1993 film tie-in paperback edition front cover featuring visuals from Wayne Wang's feature film adaptation. Amy Tan, *The Joy Luck Club*. Ivy Books, 1993.

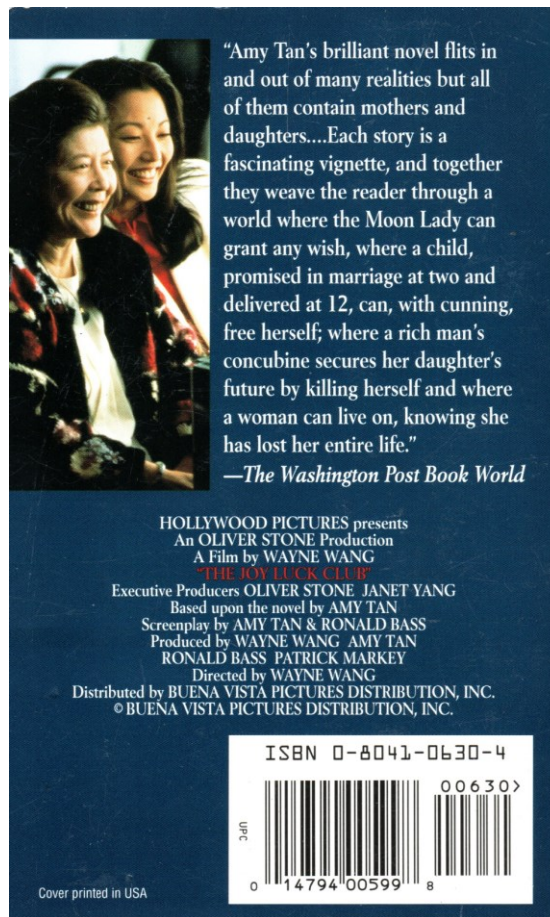


Figure 6. *The Joy Luck Club* 1993 film tie-in paperback edition back cover featuring an image of characters from the film. Amy Tan, *The Joy Luck Club*. Ivy Books, 1993.

Promotional strategy: Mass Paperback and Film Tie-In

The peritext on the front cover of the 1993 film tie-in edition of *The Joy Luck Club* works to present the book to a mass audience by highlighting its mainstream success. The “*New York Times* Bestseller” line announces the popularity of the novel and the red “now a major motion picture!” circle provides a sense of urgency for why someone should read the book now. Additionally, Tan is referred to as the “Author of *The Kitchen God’s Wife*” which marks her as an established writer.

The blurbs on this edition are extracts from mainstream American newspaper reviews. This has the effect of validating the popular appeal of the novel. *The New York Times Book Review* calls *The Joy Luck Club* “Beautifully written...A jewel of a book.” On

the back cover, a synopsis-style excerpt from a *Washington Post Book World* review is littered with plot details of each “fascinating vignette” of the movie. Lastly, film production credits and another film still solidify the association with the newly released film. The notable absence of author endorsement blurbs on this edition can be read to reflect the positioning of this edition for a more general audience rather than a literary audience.

New York Times arts reporter Andrew Chow provides insight into the cultural impact of the film. He details how trailblazing Asian American director Wayne Wang approached Tan to turn her novel into a film. Tan agreed and collaborated on the screenplay for the film. At the time, *The Joy Luck Club* was only the second American feature film with an all-Asian cast and the first to hit cinema screens since the 1960s.⁸⁸ Chow argues that a moment of promise for increased and sustained Asian American representation in American media did not materialize and some people in the community were frustrated by what they deemed tokenizing portrayals of Asian Americans – criticisms scholars such as Wong have also aimed at Tan’s original text.⁸⁹

Understanding how audiences have interacted with *The Joy Luck Club* as a novel and film provides crucial context for how the book gets repositioned to new audiences over time. TV critic Inkoo Kang reflects on the contentious legacy of *The Joy Luck Club* amongst Asian Americans and calls on critics of the text to redirect their frustration away from individual creatives by stating:

If the mainstream film or publishing industries had been more welcoming toward all kinds of stories from all kinds of communities, none of these works or entertainers would be loaded with the expectation that they please everyone. But an environment where only one person, or portrayal, is permitted to stand in for the whole is bound to turn into a breeding ground for resentment.⁹⁰

Kang’s comments show how the publishing industry’s investment in championing a handful of exceptional racialized authors and treating them as a stand-in for systemic progress does a disservice to both authors and audiences. Squires notes that marketing

⁸⁸ Andrew R. Chow, “In 1993, ‘The Joy Luck Club’ Changed Hollywood. Until It Didn’t.” *The New York Times*, September 9, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/09/movies/joy-luck-club-crazy-rich-asians.html>.

⁸⁹ Wong, “Sugar Sisterhood”.

⁹⁰ Inkoo Kang, “It’s Time to Forgive *The Joy Luck Club*.” *Slate*, August 17, 2018, <https://slate.com/culture/2018/08/the-joy-luck-club-needs-to-be-forgiven-by-asian-americans.html>.

is an “inextricable fusion” of both epitext and peritext, a factor that is present as media, academic, and reader responses to *The Joy Luck Club* shape the authorship and tone of blurbs for the 30th anniversary edition of the book.⁹¹

3.5. *The Joy Luck Club* 2019 US 30th Anniversary Paperback

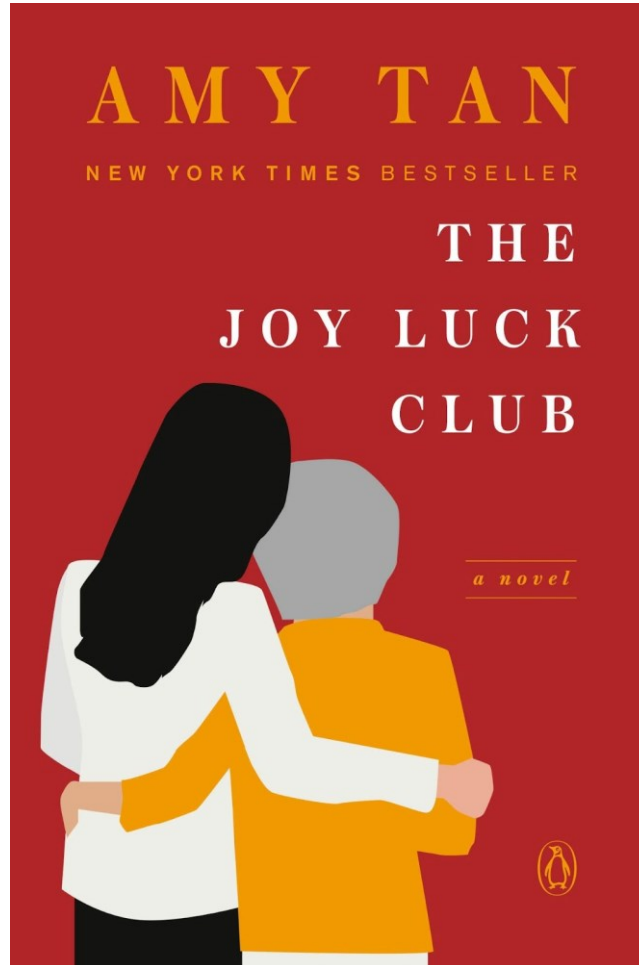


Figure 7. *The Joy Luck Club* 30th anniversary paperback edition front cover. Amy Tan, *The Joy Luck Club*. Rev. ed. New York: Penguin Books, 2019.

⁹¹ Squires, *Marketing Literature*, 75.

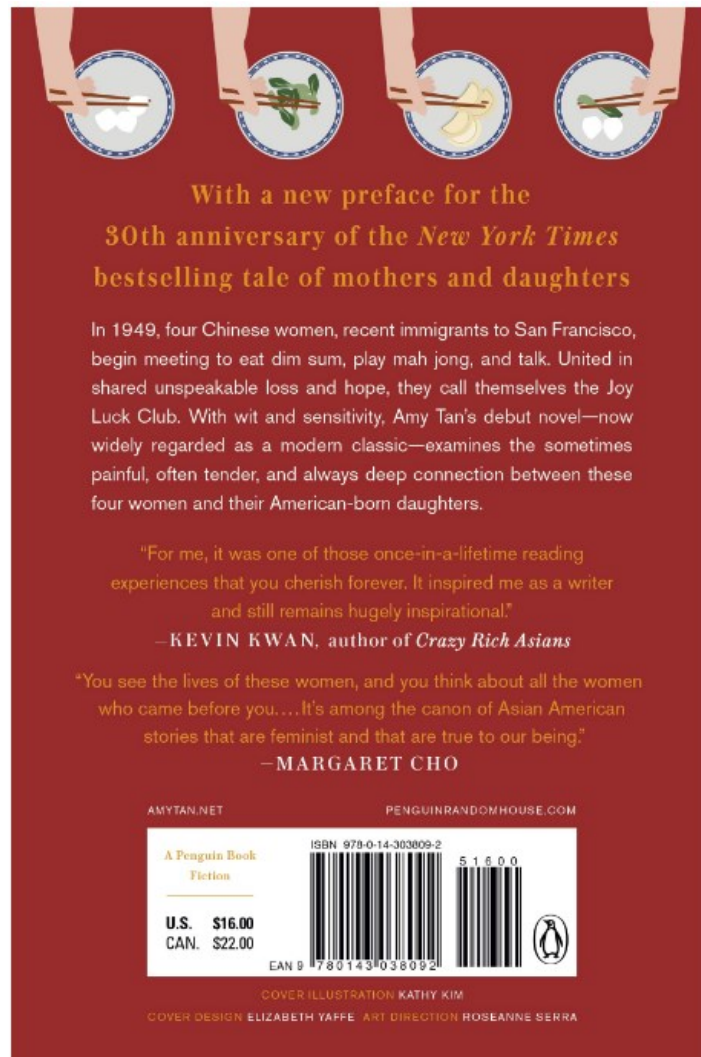


Figure 8. *The Joy Luck Club* 30th anniversary paperback edition back cover celebrates the legacy of the novel and features blurbs from contemporary public figures. Amy Tan, *The Joy Luck Club*. Rev. ed. New York: Penguin Books, 2019.

Promotional Strategy: Focusing on Legacy

The 30th anniversary paperback edition of *The Joy Luck Club*, published in 2019 by Penguin Books, uses peritext to package the novel as a canonized work. Illustrations of women embracing on the front and a series of Chinese food illustrations on the back indicate the book's focus on intergenerational relationships amongst Chinese American women. Copy on the back cover announces a new preface, the bestseller status of the novel, and tells readers that Tan's debut is "now widely regarded as a modern classic."

The blurbs on the back cover warmly speak to the legacy of *The Joy Luck Club*. Author Kevin Kwan’s blurb calls the book a “once-in-a-lifetime reading experience that you cherish forever” and says it “inspired me as a writer and still remains hugely inspirational.” Kwan’s reputation for telling humorous and celebratory stories of Asian American families lends an air of levity to a work that has been criticized in the past. The 2018 hit film of Kwan’s best-selling *Crazy Rich Asians* was the first studio film centred on the Asian American experience since 1993’s *Joy Luck Club*.⁹² When *Crazy Rich Asians* made waves in 2018, it brought renewed attention to how *The Joy Luck Club* was positioned and received in the media and publishing landscape of the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Comedian Margaret Cho’s blurb directly names *The Joy Luck Club* as part of the Asian American canon and notes it is a book that is both “feminist” and “true to our being”. Cho is known for her unflinching honesty, championing of LGBTQ rights, and public critique of racism and representation in the media.⁹³ Cho says, “You see the lives of these women, and you think about all the women who came before you...”. While this can indicate the mother-daughter relationships in the book itself, Cho’s reputation for uplifting women and the reflective tone of the anniversary edition means the blurb can also be read as Cho acknowledging Tan’s work and legacy.

Out of the three editions reviewed in this case study, the 30th anniversary edition is the first time publishers obtained and selected blurbs from Asian Americans.⁹⁴ The use of Kwan and Cho’s blurbs leverages their influence in media and culture, but it also offers a new way of authenticating the legacy and relevance of the book to younger, more socially engaged audiences.

⁹² Kang, “It’s Time to Forgive *The Joy Luck Club*.”

⁹³ PBS, “Pioneers of Television: Margaret Cho”, PBS, Accessed February 7, 2022, <https://www.pbs.org/wnet/pioneers-of-television/pioneering-people/margaret-cho/#:~:text=She%20returned%20to%20standup%20and,several%20wildly%20popular%20come%20dy%20specials>.

⁹⁴ Thanks to Jen Sookfong Lee, the industry advisor for this report, for pointing out that the lack of Asian American blurbs on previous editions of *The Joy Luck Club* was due to the lack of famous Asian American’s with name recognition relevant to book sales in 1989 and 1993, when the book and film were released.

3.6. Case Study #2: Celeste Ng's *Little Fires Everywhere*

This case study looks at the three editions of *Little Fires Everywhere*: the original 2017 hardcover, a 2019 paperback, and the 2020 TV tie-in. While this case study observes the life of a text over several years, rather than decades, it still shows how publishers use peritext, including blurbs, to position a book in the literary marketplace.

Set in idyllic 1990s mid-West suburbia, *Little Fires Everywhere* probes the surface of “nice” white womanhood that was until recently, perceived in white-dominant mainstream media as benign or inscrutable, that is if it was perceived at all.⁹⁵ It was the second, much-anticipated book from Ng who had gained a significant literary and media profile following the success of her debut *Everything I Never Told You*, named Amazon’s Book of the Year in 2014.⁹⁶

In published interviews, the Penguin Press publishing team describes the scale of the promotional campaign dedicated to this book. Senior Editor Virginia Smith says, “We began working on the publicity and marketing campaigns for *Little Fires Everywhere* relatively early, maybe about nine or ten months before publication in earnest”,⁹⁷ while Assistant Director of Publicity Juliana Kiyana says “it was all hands on deck from the day of acquisition.”⁹⁸ Similarly to accounts of the acquisition of *The Joy Luck Club*, these details about the coordinated team effort to produce *Little Fires Everywhere* indicate that

⁹⁵ Ng speaks to her experiences with white women readers recognizing Elena Richardson’s unpleasant traits but resisting self-identifying with this type of whiteness when she is interviewed in the *BuzzFeed* article “Celeste Ng Says ‘Little Fires Everywhere’ Is A Challenge To ‘Well-Intentioned’ White Ladies”, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/annehelenpetersen/little-fires-everywhere-hulu-celeste-ng-reese-witherspoon>.

⁹⁶ Mark Lawson, “Everything I Never Told You Review – Amazon’s Best Book of the Year by Celeste Ng,” *The Guardian*, November 20, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/nov/20/everything-i-never-told-you-celeste-ng-review-amazon-best-book-year>

⁹⁷ Virginia Smith, “The Life of a Book: An Interview with the Editor of LITTLE FIRES EVERYWHERE, Virginia Smith, Senior Editor at the Penguin Press,” interview by Amy Brinker. Penguin Random House, August 24, 2017. <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/2017/08/the-life-of-a-book-an-interview-with-the-editor-of-little-fires-everywhere-virginia-smith-senior-editor-at-the-penguin-press/>

⁹⁸ Juliana Kiyana, “The life of a Book: An Interview with Assistant Director of Publicity at the Penguin Press, Juliana Kiyana,” interviewed by Amy Brinker. Penguin Random House, September 7, 2027. <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/2017/09/the-life-of-a-book-an-interview-with-assistant-director-of-publicity-at-the-penguin-press-juliana-kiyan/>.

the publisher prioritized time, financial, and personnel resources towards it as an anticipated big book of the season.

While it may seem like recent history, the social context surrounding the publication of *Little Fires Everywhere* in 2017 plays a role in how the book was received by audiences at the time. Republican President Donald Trump's first year in office was marked by intensified racist and anti-immigrant rhetoric in the public sphere, with violent flashpoints such as deadly white nationalist rallies in Charlottesville reverberating through American political and social life.⁹⁹ The Women's March intensified public conversations around the shortcomings of a liberal white feminism that neglected active and sustained solidarity with Black, Indigenous, and Women of Colour (BIPOC).¹⁰⁰

Celeste Ng was amongst many writers who used their platforms to call out political and racial injustice. In an interview with writer and editor Nicole Chung, Ng reflected on her Twitter presence in a changing political landscape:

You could say I became much more political with the advent of the 2016 election, when the stakes became much higher for me as a woman, a woman of color, and a child of immigrants. But really I've always been political, because when you're in any marginalized group, your existence is politicized for you, whether you like it or not.¹⁰¹

The interview was released on *Little Fires Everywhere's* publication day, making connections between Ng's social commentary as an author within her novels and in public life.

⁹⁹ Felicia Sonmez and Ashley Parker, "As Trump Stands By Charlottesville Remarks, Rise of White Nationalist Violence Becomes An Issue in 2020 Presidential Race," *The Washington Post*, April 28, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/as-trump-stands-by-charlottesville-remarks-rise-of-white-nationalist-violence-becomes-an-issue-in-2020-presidential-race/2019/04/28/83aaf1ca-69c0-11e9-a66d-a82d3f3d96d5_story.html.

¹⁰⁰ Roxane Gay, "The Women's March Was Messy and Imperfect, But a Good Start", *Glamour*, January 20, 2018, <https://www.glamour.com/story/roxane-gay-the-womens-march-was-messy-and-imperfect-but-a-good-start>.

¹⁰¹ Nicole Chung, "'I've Always Been Political': Celeste Ng and Nicole Chung in Conversation", *Literary Hub*, September 12, 2017, <https://lithub.com/ive-always-been-political-celeste-ng-and-nicole-chung-in-conversation/>.

3.7. Leveraging Goodreads and Celebrity Impact

A rising author profile and publisher support helped *Little Fires Everywhere's* success but savvy social media marketing and connections to celebrity were also instrumental. A Goodreads case study shows the publisher made Goodreads a priority for their marketing efforts. They focused on the cataloguing and social networking site partly because of Ng's presence on the platform and partly based on evidence that it was one of the best ways to build "real, tangible buzz among readers."¹⁰²

On Goodreads, "the Penguin Press team strategically *sparked* and built interest with four critical audiences—readers, booksellers, librarians, and media—using multiple channels to drive awareness, anticipation, and early reviews.¹⁰³ These tactics are concerted efforts to identify advocates and induce word-of-mouth (as detailed in Chapter Two of this report) via reviews and shares.¹⁰⁴ Penguin Press' sophisticated campaign ensured *Little Fires Everywhere* maintained high visibility and circulation on a vital social sharing platform for avid-readers. By the end of the year it was one of the most-rated books on the platform.¹⁰⁵ While Penguin Press did not reveal their budget for this campaign, the scale and execution suggest the use of significant marketing resources.¹⁰⁶

The Goodreads case study notes the publisher benefited from some "*unexpected accelerants that further fueled the fire*" of *Little Fires Everywhere's* success.¹⁰⁷ Notably, *Little Fires Everywhere* was one of the first books selected by actor and producer Reese Witherspoon when she launched her enormously successful book club in 2017. Witherspoon regularly participated in social media cross-over conversations to promote

¹⁰² Goodreads. "Case Study: How Penguin Press Made 'Little Fires Everywhere' a Roaring Success," Goodreads, May 22, 2018, <https://www.goodreads.com/blog/show/1283-case-study-how-penguin-press-made-little-fires-everywhere-a-roaring-s>.

¹⁰³ Goodreads. "Case Study." Emphasis added.

¹⁰⁴ In social media marketing, online reviews and recommendations are considered a form of word-of-mouth. CrowdRiff, "21 User-Generated Content Stats."

¹⁰⁵ Goodreads. "Case Study."

¹⁰⁶ Comments on the Goodreads case study also suggest the financial magnitude of Penguin Press' campaign, with many users commenting that while that case study is interesting, its methods (such as conducting numerous giveaways) are inaccessible to most publishers. <https://www.goodreads.com/blog/show/1283-case-study-how-penguin-press-made-little-fires-everywhere-a-roaring-s>

¹⁰⁷ Goodreads. "Case Study.", Emphasis added.

the book, where her celebrity status brought the book to her millions of followers.¹⁰⁸ BookScan executive director Kirsten McLean commented that for authors, getting their book selected for Reese’s Book Club was “the equivalent of winning the lottery.”¹⁰⁹ This shows the importance of name recognition to capture media and industry attention in publishing, but it is also worth noting that Witherspoon’s involvement in the book was not altruistic, but a business decision. In 2018, *Deadline* reported that Witherspoon was involved in talks to produce an adaptation of *Little Fires Everywhere* before the book had even been published.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Constance Grady, “How Reese Witherspoon Became the New High Priestess of Book Clubs,” *Vox*, September 20, 2019. <https://www.vox.com/the-highlight/2019/9/13/20802579/reese-witherspoon-reeses-book-club-oprah>.

¹¹⁰ Nellie Andreeva, “Hulu Nabs ‘Little Fires Everywhere’ Limited Series Starring Reese Witherspoon & Kerry Washington”, *Deadline*, March 12, 2018, <https://deadline.com/2018/03/hulu-series-order-little-fires-everywhere-reese-witherspoon-kerry-washington-1202336463/>.

3.8. *Little Fires Everywhere* 2017 US Original Hardcover

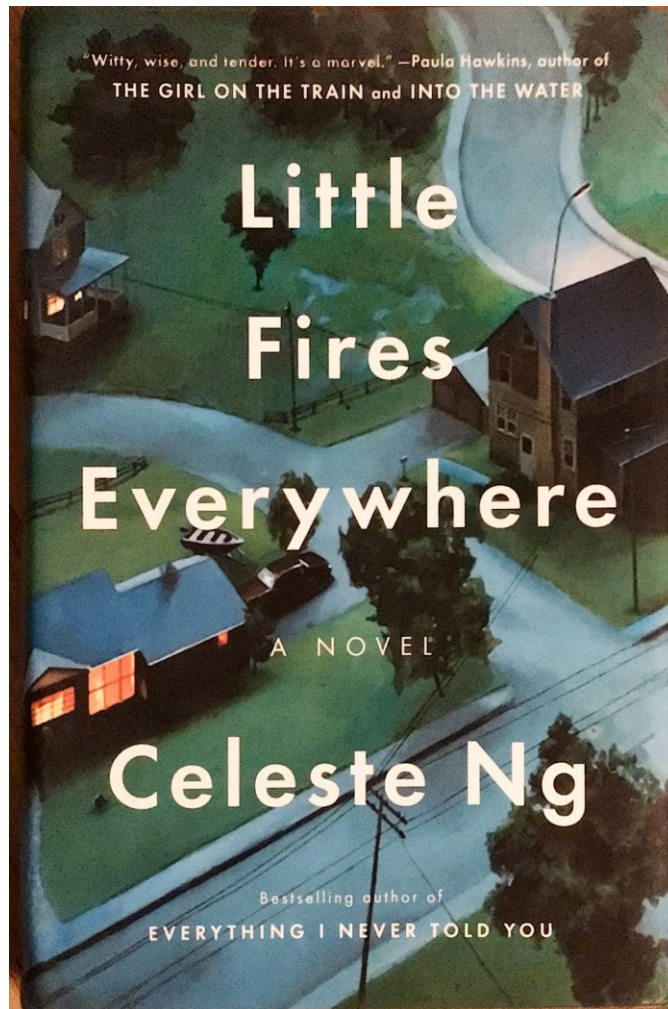


Figure 9. The front panel of the *Little Fires Everywhere* 2017 hardcover dust jacket, with author Paula Hawkins' blurb at the top. Celeste Ng, *Little Fires Everywhere*. New York: Penguin Press, 2017.

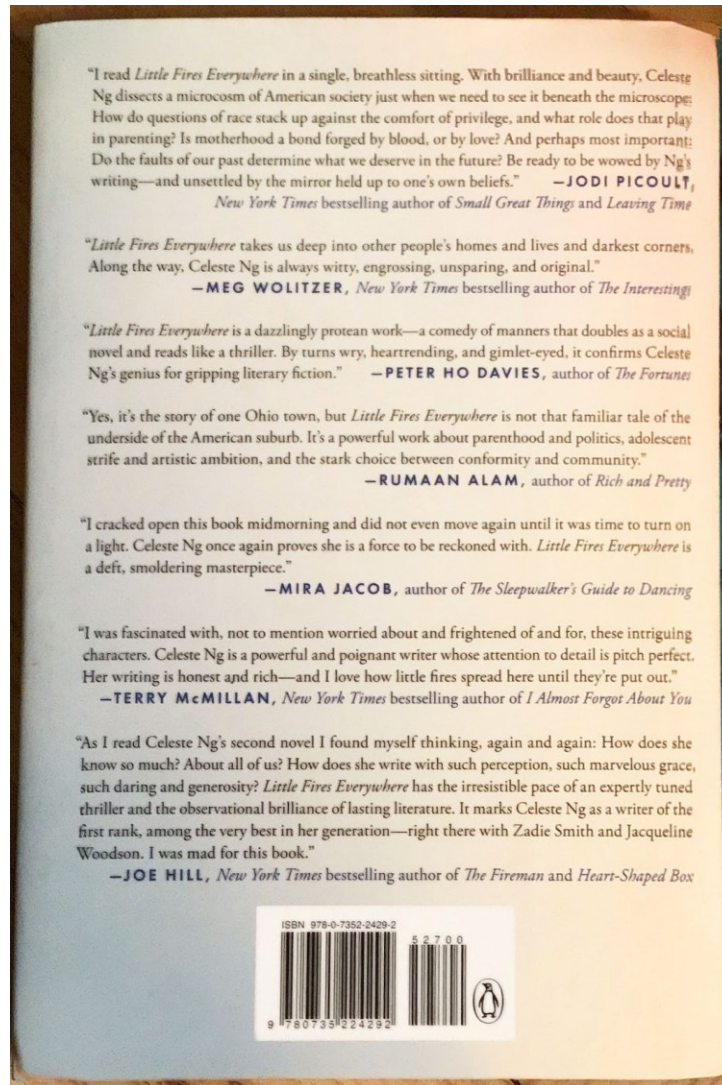


Figure 10. The back panel of the *Little Fires Everywhere* 2017 hardcover dust jacket featuring seven lengthy author endorsement blurbs. Celeste Ng, *Little Fires Everywhere*. New York: Penguin Press, 2017.

Promotional Strategy: Association with “Domestic” Thrillers

The original jacket of *Little Fires Everywhere* shows an illustration of the idyllic suburban setting of the novel. The author’s name and the title are of equal size, indicating the growing profile of Ng, who is also named as the bestselling author of *Everything I Never Told You*. The only blurb on the front panel is by British novelist Paula Hawkins. Hawkins would have been top of mind for industry and consumer readers due to the success of *The Girl on the Train* in 2015 which was labeled the

“fastest-selling adult novel in history”, reaching over 1 million sales within months.¹¹¹ Hawkins was named as part of a wave of female-centred “domestic noir books”.¹¹² While Hawkins’ blurb does not comment on the plot of *Little Fires Everywhere* (she calls it “witty, wise, and tender”) her endorsement helps associate the book with a profitable and publicized book trend – something Squires calls the use of “perceived literary allegiances.”¹¹³ As such, Hawkins’ blurb acts as a personal endorsement (I loved this book) *and* a recommendation (If you loved my book, here is your next read).

The back panel is text-heavy with a laundry list of blurbs, in a style often reserved for the front matter of a novel.¹¹⁴ Several blurbers speak to their reading experience as transformational and transporting. Jodi Picoult, known for emotionally charged novels, says she read the book in a “single, breathless sitting.” Mira Jacob says she “cracked open this book midmorning and did not even move again until it was time to turn on a light.” In the frenetic pace of modern life, the claim that a book is worthy of a reader’s time is a valuable testimony to the quality of the work.

Authors Peter Ho Davies and Joe Hill speak to the pacing and tone of the book by calling it a literary thriller. Picoult challenges readers to be “unsettled by the mirror held up to one’s own beliefs” and Hill exclaims about Ng, “How does she know so much? About all of us?”. Baverstock argues the aim of promotional copy is “a believable promise aimed at the right audience.”¹¹⁵ These blurbs promise an emotional experience for readers, but also personally invite them into a shared community of people keen to interrogate social values and the complex dynamics of interpersonal relationships.

¹¹¹ William O’Connor, “The Fastest-Selling Adult Novel in History: Paula Hawkins’ ‘The Girl On The Train’”, *The Daily Beast*, July 12, 2017, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/the-fastest-selling-adult-novel-in-history-paula-hawkins-the-girl-on-the-train>.

¹¹² Emily Saner, “The Girl on the Train: How Paula Hawkins Wrote ‘the new Gone Girl’”, *The Guardian*, April 21, 2015. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/apr/21/the-girl-on-the-train-paula-hawkins-new-gone-girl-female-thriller-authors-gillian-flynn>.

¹¹³ Squires, *Marketing Literature*, 179.

¹¹⁴ The first few pages of a book, typically called the front matter or prelims, will often include a more extensive list of blurbs. Sometimes a blurb will simultaneously feature on a book’s cover *and* in the front matter. If a cover blurb has been extracted from a more extensive review or piece of advanced praise, the longer version is often displayed in the front matter.

¹¹⁵ Baverstock, *How to Market Books*, 39.

3.9. *Little Fires Everywhere* 2019 US Paperback

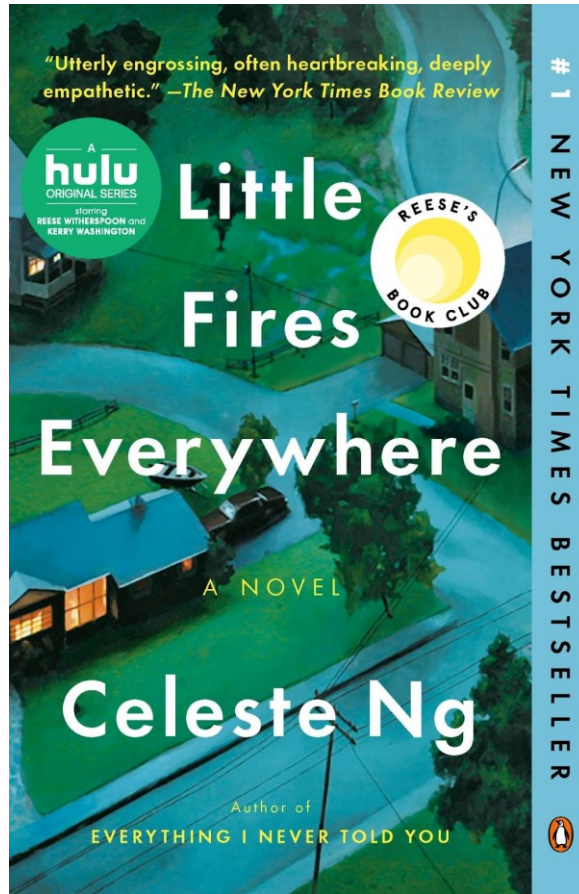


Figure 11. *Little Fires Everywhere* 2019 paperback front cover with stickers for Reese's Book Club and a forthcoming Hulu adaptation visible, Celeste Ng, *Little Fires Everywhere*. New York: Penguin Books, 2019.

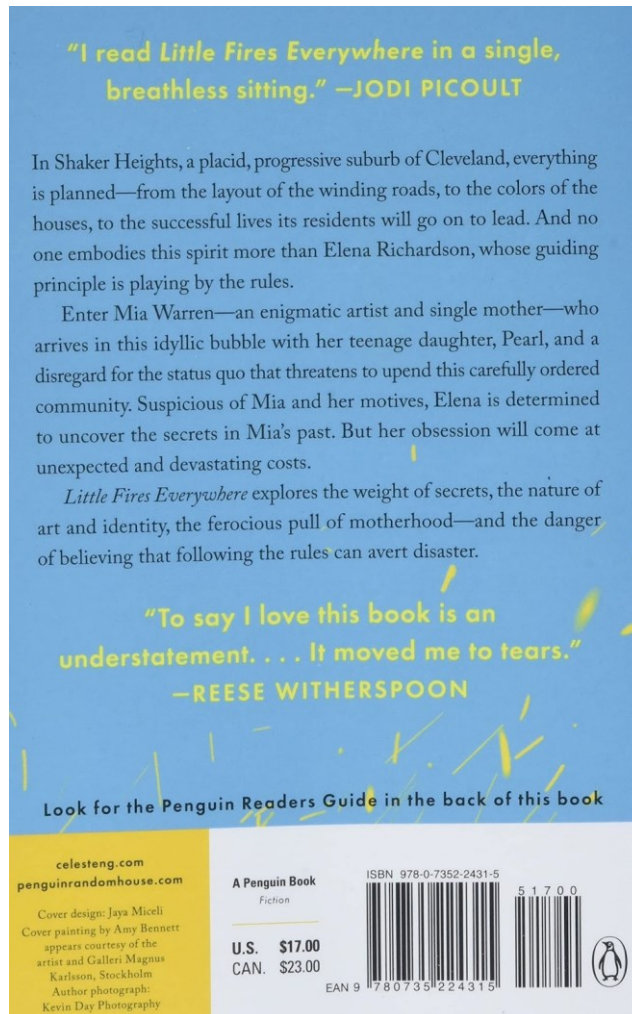


Figure 12. The back cover of the 2019 paperback of *Little Fires Everywhere*. Note the shortened versions of Picoult’s original 2017 blurb and the new inclusion of Witherspoon’s emotional blurb. Celeste Ng, *Little Fires Everywhere*. New York: Penguin Books, 2019.

Promotional Strategy: Popular Seal of Approval

The cover of the 2019 paperback of *Little Fires Everywhere* has several elements that cement its status as a bestselling book of the moment. Embedded “stickers” show it is both a Reese’s Book Club pick and a forthcoming Hulu TV series. First published by Penguin Press, a literary imprint of Penguin Random House, the paperback edition now features Penguin motifs, such as an orange spine and the penguin logo, which give the book the air of a modern, vetted classic.

In this edition, Hawkins’ blurb is no longer on the front cover but is now housed in the front pages of the novel. Perhaps her name recognition was beginning to wane or

the publishers wanted to refresh the tone of the front cover blurb. In its place, a *New York Times Book Review* says the novel is “Utterly engrossing, often heartbreaking, deeply empathetic.” This mainstream media blurb shows how the publisher is shifting the promotion of the book to a mass audience.

In keeping with a theme of blurbs migrating to different points of prominence on different editions of books, Picoult’s blurb is still on the back cover but has now been shortened. The other blurbs from the 2017 back cover have been relegated to the front matter where they are less likely to be read by consumers. The back cover now has a synopsis of the book and a reminder for readers to look inside for a Penguin Readers Guide, peritext that is appealing to book clubs. It also prominently displays Witherspoon’s blurb, solidifying her involvement in the popularity of the book and building anticipation for the TV-adaptation.

3.10. *Little Fires Everywhere* 2020 US TV Tie-In Edition



Figure 13. The front cover of the *Little Fires Everywhere* 2020 TV tie-in paperback edition shows actor-producers Reese Witherspoon and Kerry Washington in character. Celeste, Ng. *Fires Everywhere*. New York: Penguin Books, 2020.



Figure 14. The back cover of the *Little Fires Everywhere* 2020 TV tie-in paperback edition. Jodi Picoult’s blurb still features on the back cover. Celeste, Ng. *Fires Everywhere*. New York: Penguin Books, 2020.

Promotional Strategy: Star Power and Prestige TV

The majority of the promotional work done by the cover of the 2020 TV tie-in edition of *Little Fires Everywhere* is done by the star power of the show’s lead actors, who also collaborated to produce the adaptation.¹¹⁶ The cover features a promotional

¹¹⁶ Witherspoon’s involvement in extremely successful book-to-screen adaptations of women-centred stories such as *Wild* and *Big Little Lies* with her production company Hello Sunshine have led some to call her a tastemaker on the scale of Oprah. <https://www.vox.com/the-highlight/2019/9/13/20802579/reese-witherspoon-reeses-book-club-oprah>

still of Witherspoon and Kerry Washington, in character as the judgmental Elena Richardson and enigmatic Mia Warren respectively, divided by a rippling motif of fire.¹¹⁷ *The Atlantic* cultural writer Shirley Li notes that, while Ng does not explicitly name the race of the Warrens, in the TV adaptation Mia and her daughter are Black. This adds layers of complexity to the judgement and suspicion they face from Elena and the overwhelmingly white community of Shaker Heights.¹¹⁸

Witherspoon and Washington's reputations for starring as complex female leads in hit shows [*Big Little Lies* (2017-2019) and *Scandal* (2012-2018) respectively] as well as their public roles as celebrities and social commentators, mean their images on the book cover function as visual endorsement and promotion. Aside from the removal of the Reese's Book Club sticker and Witherspoon's back cover blurb, all the other blurbs and cover copy have stayed similar to the 2019 paperback. *The New York Times Book Review* blurb remains on the front in smaller font, while Jodi Picoult's blurb remains on the back.

Little Fires Everywhere premiered on Hulu on March 18, 2020, the same week most the world first shut down due to the COVID-19 pandemic.¹¹⁹ While streaming services are notoriously stingy about releasing viewing figures, Hulu executives revealed it was the most-watched show ever on their platforms within the first 60 days of release.¹²⁰ Squires states that moments of media attention prompt publishers and marketing teams to "put together a plan of action to support and sustain media

¹¹⁷ This image was used extensively in digital and physical ads for the show – such as this subway ad promoting the *Little Fires Everywhere* TV premier that Celeste Ng posted on her Instagram in spring 2020. https://www.instagram.com/p/B8xwl_hA_hy/. This is an example of the sort of promotional budgets media companies have that publishers do not typically have accessed to.

¹¹⁸ Shirley Li, "When a TV Adaptation Does What the Book Could Not," *The Atlantic*, March 31, 2020. <https://www.theatlantic.com/culture/archive/2020/03/little-fires-everywhere-hulu-series-pivotal-change-from-novel/609151/>

¹¹⁹ While Hulu acted as the primary distributor of the series in March 2020 in the United States, many viewers will associate the show with Amazon Prime as they distributed the show in May 2020 for many non-American markets, including Canada. <https://deadline.com/2020/05/amazon-reese-witherspoon-kerry-washington-series-little-fires-everywhere-key-international-markets-1202928461/>

¹²⁰ Jason Lynch (@JasonLynch). "Hulu's Head of Creative Scott Donaton says." Twitter, June 22, 2020. <https://twitter.com/jasonlynch/status/1275141844960030721>

interest.”¹²¹ It clearly worked. *Publishers Weekly* reported *Little Fires Everywhere* returned to bestseller lists in 2020 for a total of 20 weeks.¹²²

Case Studies Conclusion

The case studies in this chapter demonstrate how blurbs have observable patterns and functions as a marketing tool for publishers. Analyzing different editions of a book over time shows the ephemeral and liminal qualities of blurbs in action, as blurbs can migrate to different parts of a book and take on different levels of prominence based on behind-the-scenes decisions from publishers, marketers, and designers.

The prestige of blurbs can signal the coordination and commitment of a publishers’ marketing team, which can catalyze further industry attention, engagement, and publicity. As in the example of Walker’s blurb for the 1989 hardcover of *The Joy Luck Club*, observations about the significance of blurbs can be confirmed by epitextual evidence (in this case, a trade publication). Blurbs are evidence of professional conversations about books, and they are also a vehicle to generate further conversation about books.

Case studies of blurbs provide opportunities to see the publishing landscapes, business decisions, histories, and social contexts that shape the production and reception of a text.¹²³ They draw attention to how the publishing industry and media can get overly invested success stories and the exaggerated language of promotion. While the “magic” success of *The Joy Luck Club* or “wildfire” sales of *Little Fires Everywhere* make compelling stories, such stories can obfuscate the power and influence of marketing budgets, agents, and lucrative adaptation deals, in creating and sustaining bestselling novels.

¹²¹ Claire Squires, “Book Marketing and the Booker Prize,” in *Judging a Book by Its Cover: Fans, Publishers, Designers, and the Marketing of Fiction*, eds. Nicole Matthews and Nickianne Moody (Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2007): 73.

¹²² Liz Hartman, “Breaking Down 2020 Bestsellers by Publisher,” *Publishers Weekly*, January 15, 2021, <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/bookselling/article/85330-breaking-down-the-bestselling-books-of-2020.html>.

¹²³ Squires, *Marketing Literature*, 7.

Chapter 4.

Structural Critique: The Opportunities and Limitations of Blurbs

Studying the publishing histories of books illuminates how blurbs can be a microcosm of networks of influence, power, and decision-making in the publishing industry. In “Is It Time To Kill the Book Blurb?” Delistraty cautions that blurbs can “reinforce the hegemony of the literary establishment”, particularly when it comes to racism and classism in publishing.¹²⁴ When publishing professionals and authors stick to who they know (from shared institutions such as MFA programs) they are more likely to endorse books and authors that feel familiar. These biases can gate keep access to publishing resources as well as limit works that challenge existing publishing structures, or are not legible to those structures. This chapter explores structural conservatism in the publishing industry and looks at the opportunities and limitations of blurbs.

4.1. Structural Conservatism in Decision Making

The overwhelming whiteness of the publishing industry, particularly at the executive level, impacts publishing decisions and can restrict which stories by marginalized and underrepresented authors get told.¹²⁵ Despite consistent calls for change, racial inequity in publishing has not yet changed significantly at a structural level.¹²⁶

Cultural analytics scholar Richard Jean So conducts empirical studies of publishing trends to corroborate structural barriers people of colour in publishing have long known. So argues the publishing industry has stark structural limitations but is often unwilling or unable to grasp these limitations. Specifically, he says American publishers

¹²⁴ Delistraty, “Is It Time to Kill the Book Blurb?”

¹²⁵ McGrath’s ‘Comping White’ shows American publishing demographics remain overwhelmingly white and slow to change. <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/comping-white/>.

¹²⁶ John Maher, “New Lee and Low Survey Shows No Progress on Diversity in Publishing,” *Publishers Weekly*, January 29, 2020. <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/publisher-news/article/82284-new-lee-and-low-survey-shows-no-progress-on-diversity-in-publishing.html>.

over-subscribe to a narrative of multiculturalism and progressive change to the extent that it obscures the reality of the continued exclusion of minority authors in the production, reception, and recognition of American literature.¹²⁷ So also finds that while publishers may understand their decisions on a local level, they “don’t have a good grasp of what they are doing at scale”.¹²⁸ Ongoing inequities in publishing, as in all facets of work and life, are systemic and insidious and their negative impacts reverberate regardless of individual intent.

As a result, publishing continues to mistake the success of a few individual authors for the transformation of the field as a whole.¹²⁹ The conflation of authors that share identities, assumptions they do similar work, and the idea that there can be only one at a time is pervasive and problematic. Despite being published 30 years apart, Tan and Ng both comment on their discomfort with being pigeonholed as the go-to Asian American women writer of the moment. In an interview with *ABC News* Ng said, “There was Amy Tan, and if anyone else was going to come in, it was going to be to displace her...I do not want to replace her, I would like there to be more.”¹³⁰ While So acknowledges some signs of progress in publishing, he cautions against mistaking narratives of exceptionalism for sustained structural change.

Literature and cultural analytics scholar Laura B. McGrath also uses data to look at how decision-making in publishing can be limited at a structural level. McGrath analyzes comparative (comp) titles – the practice of comparing a book to an existing, successful title to assess its sales and marketability potential. Comps and blurbs share some similarities – both are used to assess and communicate value throughout the publishing industry and both trade in name recognition and commercial success. As peritext, however, blurbs can travel with books into public-facing communication that consumers can encounter, while comps are usually industry-facing.

¹²⁷ So, *Redlining Culture*, 5.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹³⁰ Jinsol Jung, “Author Celeste Ng Talks Asian American Representation and Using Fiction to ‘Ask Questions,’” *ABC News*, May 8, 2019, <https://abcnews.go.com/US/author-celeste-ng-talks-asian-american-representation-fiction/story?id=62918959>.

McGrath argues that “Above all, comps are conservative. They manage expectations and are designed to predict as safe a bet as possible. They are built on the idea that *if it worked before, it will work again*.”¹³¹ This conservative logic ties back to neoliberal business ideologies (discussed in Chapter 2), but also has the effect of gatekeeping access to the literary marketplace.¹³² Blurbs are used to associate books with famous and successful authors, creating exclusivity around who gets to blurb.

4.2. Who Gets to Blurb?

Blurbs require name recognition to function effectively as persuasive endorsements. This tends to mean that authors who are asked to write blurbs are limited to a literary elite who have obtained significant commercial success.¹³³ While commenting on the marketability of the author-figure in contemporary publishing, Douglas argues that blurbs are an avenue through which to view authors as both creators and observant social commentators. She says, “consumerist values assert that authors can and should be whomever the reader wants them to be, and *whomever the market demands*.”¹³⁴ Just as publishing requires authors to engage in near-constant self-promotion, the industry also capitalizes on the name, reputation, and success of authors to continue selling other books.

Squires observes that a focus on the celebrity and marketability of authors bestows journalistic capital – recognition within the publishing industry and media – on authors whose success in the literary marketplace has made them both visible and valuable.¹³⁵ However, visibility and value can be fickle and are worth closer inspection. For example, obtaining Walker’s blurb for *The Joy Luck Club* was an effective way to capture the attention of industry and public readers. It fulfilled its promotional function. However, in 1989 after a decade in the spotlight, one cannot help wondering how frequently Walker was contacted for blurbs. Was her endorsement in high demand and circulated in the publishing industry in ways that isolated her, an exceptionally successful

¹³¹ Laura B. McGrath, “Comping White.” LA Review of Books, January 21, 2019. <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/comping-white/>.

¹³² McGrath, “Comping White.”

¹³³ Squires, *Marketing Literature*, 37.

¹³⁴ Douglas, “‘Blurbings’ Biographical”, 821. Emphasis added.

¹³⁵ Squires, *Marketing Literature*, 37.

Black author, as a stand-in for publishing more books by Black women? Further study quantifying *who* has blurbed and how often, that draws upon data analysis like So and McGrath's work, is necessary to evolve these questions.

4.3. Can Blurbs Ever Be Sincere? Rejections and Accusations

Publishing professionals and writers may frequently discuss the function and validity of blurbs, but flashpoints of author or reader alienation from blurbs can render the practice of blurbing more visible to the general public.

One example of this is when British writer Jeanette Winterson made headlines in 2021 for burning copies of her books that had been republished with “cosy little domestic blurbs” she felt misrepresented her work.¹³⁶ Responses to her actions varied. Some thought it was childish or a ploy for publicity, while others saw it as empowering. Most notably, many expressed confusion that authors do not have as much creative control of how their work is packaged in the marketplace as they had thought.¹³⁷ It was an instance of heightened conversation about the role of blurbs, but it does beg the question of *who* gets to publically reject their publisher's decisions. Winterson's whiteness plays a huge role in her ability to critique the credibility of her publishers' marketing efforts without fear of serious reprisal in her career. Racialized writers are rarely afforded such luxury in professional and public life. Additionally, awareness of the conventions of respectability politics, the idea that adherence dominant culture behavioural norms will protect marginalized people from prejudice, often informs how racialized authors choose to engage with the publishing industry and media. While the way Winterson rejected her books' blurbs is polarizing, the conflict arguably stems from miscommunication and misalignment between Winterson and her publisher.

In “Beware of Blurbs” journalist and critic Laura Miller gives voice to frustration and weariness about blurbs. Miller writes that blurbs are “a product of all the stuff people

¹³⁶ Edna Mohamed, “Jeanette Winterson Burns Her Own Books in Protest at ‘Cosy Little Blurbs,’” *The Guardian*, June 4, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/jun/04/jeanette-winterson-burns-her-own-books-in-outrage-at-cosy-little-blurbs>.

¹³⁷ Jeanette Winterson (@Wintersonworld). “Absolutely hated the cosy little domestic blurbs on my new covers.” *Twitter*, June 4, 2021. <https://twitter.com/Wintersonworld/status/1400848078022877191>.

claim to hate about publishing: its cliquishness and insularity”.¹³⁸ She notes that above all, blurbs communicate social and professional capital – who an author knows, the institutions and communities they are a part of, and the influence of their agent. Miller argues that because blurbs centre around relationships, friends heap glowing praise on each other’s books regardless of their quality leading to “praise inflation” that has rendered blurbs fundamentally insincere.¹³⁹

But what would a sincere blurb look like? Whether blurbs resonate is subjective. What may be cringe-worthy to one person may be intriguing to another. All blurbs do promotional work and many reveal insights into publishing and media professional connections. In some ways, calls for authentic blurbs recall a core tension between marketing and publishing, and a desire to separate books from the trappings of being a commodity that requires marketing strategies such as publicity and promotion.

Miller’s issue with blurbs touches on a common concern that blurbs erode critical assessment of books – a pattern that exists throughout blurb histories (recall Gelett and Whitman in Chapter One). But as this report has shown, blurbs are marketing materials, not critical reviews. Their job is to grab attention and persuade professional and consumer readers to read further. Perhaps cynically giving voice to the adage “there is no such thing as bad publicity”, even annoying or bad blurbs can be a talking point. Lastly, as both responses to Winterson’s book burning and Miller’s arguments show, reactions to blurbs often spike when a lack of understanding about what blurbs are and how they function leaves readers feeling betrayed or confused.

4.4. Blurbs as Generosity

Blurbs can reveal publishing cliques, but they can also reveal community building. Many authors from underrepresented or marginalized communities are vocal about using their platforms to uplift new authors. In a *New York Times* profile, author R.O Kwon admires Ng’s prolific blurbing practice and emphasizes Ng’s focused blurbing of books by Asian American women. The profile notes that “Ng’s strategic benevolence is aimed at promoting her peers, of course, but also at fixing skewed, reductive notions

¹³⁸ Laura Miller, “Beware of Blurbs,” *Salon*, July 9, 2010, https://www.salon.com/2010/07/09/blurbs_2/.

¹³⁹ Miller, “Beware of Blurbs”.

of representation.”¹⁴⁰ This is a continuation of intentional practices of generosity and disruption from prominent BIPOC writers throughout publishing history. Richard Jean So details how Toni Morrison spent decades as a Random House editor using her high-profile connections to solicit blurbs for young Black writers.¹⁴¹

In a *BookRiot* feature on blurbs, librarian Nikki DeMarco highlights how established writers like Zadie Smith are renown for selectively blurbing debut authors.¹⁴² It is worthwhile to note these approaches to blurbing because it shows that while blurbs can be a fraught subject, many authors are aware of their impact and willing to lend their name to play a part in promoting a book they believe in. Blurbs can be a source of professional validation and community support. That said, while blurbs from established authors can be a professional coup for emerging authors, they are not a replacement for mentorship and community. Additionally, the time and labour demand of blurbing books can be unsustainable for established authors.

4.5. Blurbs as Labour

Recently, moments like #PubPaidMe have put conversations about inequities in compensation and labour in publishing into more public forums.¹⁴³ BIPOC authors have led conversations on social media about publishing conventions and expectations, from how their work has been (under)valued in monetary advances to expectations of unpaid labour. The practice of blurbing is a labour issue – one that can be done with collaboration and care – but also something that can be exploited. When work is unregulated, unpaid, and made murky with layers of professional and personal obligation, it is ripe for exploitation.

¹⁴⁰ Nicole Lamy, “Celeste Ng Is More Than a Novelist,” *The New York Times*, December 20, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/20/books/celeste-ng-everything-i-never-told-you-little-fires-everywhere.html>.

¹⁴¹ So, *Redlining Culture*, 35.

¹⁴² Nikki DeMarco, “What’s in a Blurb?: The History of Book Blurbing,” *BookRiot*, July 28, 2021, <https://bookriot.com/history-of-book-blurbing>.

¹⁴³ Constance Grady, “What #PublishingPaidMe Reveals About Publishing’s Systemic Bias.” *Vox*, June 17, 2020, <https://www.vox.com/culture/2020/6/17/21285316/publishing-paid-me-diversity-black-authors-systemic-bias>.

Some BIPOC and LGBTQ authors have become more vocal about the time pressures and expectations of blurbs. At the same time as Ng has been recognized for the generosity of her blurb practice, the FAQ section on her website states: “I wish I could blurb everyone who asked, but I'm trying to balance blurb with my own work (and all the rest of life!).”¹⁴⁴ In 2021, prominent queer author Amber Dawn tweeted her intentions to take a year long hiatus from blurb as a personal time and energy boundary.¹⁴⁵ Frequently blurb Vietnamese-American author Viet Thanh Nguyen made his concerns about blurbs clear to *The Wall Street Journal*: “They create so much work, emotional labor and guilt, whether one is writing one or one is asking for one.”¹⁴⁶ Notably, Nguyen highlights not just the time commitment but the interpersonal pressure that surrounds around saying yes or no to blurb work.

In “We Need to Destroy the Blurb Industrial Complex”, Marie Myung-Ok Lee points to how the demands of blurbs cut into authors' ability to dedicate time to their own writing work.¹⁴⁷ She says authors understand how blurbs operate but blurb demands outweigh individual author's ability to meet them. The overreliance on asking high visibility authors for blurbs indicates a continuation of publishing's narrative of exceptionalism for marginalized authors in a way that troublingly puts the labour and responsibility of change back on their shoulders. Nguyen summarizes the issue succinctly: “Can blurbs help illuminate authors?...Yes, but if the publishing industry really wants to illuminate marginalized authors, it should publish more of them.”¹⁴⁸ Generosity in blurb practices is commendable but often unsustainable for overworked and hypervisible individuals. Viewing blurbs through the lens of labour draws attention to the people behind blurbs – their time, skill, and experiences – and hopefully, can be an avenue to explore more equitable and sustainable practices for amplifying and supporting books in the future.

¹⁴⁴ “Frequently Asked Questions,” Celeste Ng, <https://www.celesteng.com/contact>.

¹⁴⁵ Amber Dawn (@AmberDawnWrites). “It's been 2 months since I've blurb a book.” Twitter, July 21, 2021. <https://twitter.com/AmberDawnWrites/status/1417898132575186946>.

¹⁴⁶ Delistraty, “Is It Time to Kill the Book Blurb?”

¹⁴⁷ DeMarco, “What's in a Blurb?”

¹⁴⁸ Delistraty, “Is It Time to Kill the Book Blurb?”

Conclusion

Blurbs attract scrutiny, whether it is satire at self-promotion or suspicion around their sincerity, because they are a visible reminder of the centrality of marketing in publishing. Intermittent moments of publishing industry and author frustration at the hyperbolic language of blurbs and their reliance on celebrity reflect deeper frustrations at structural constraints in the literary marketplace. Blurbs straddle many worlds, such as marketing, media studies, linguistics, and social, economic, and corporate histories, making them a useful lens through which to observe and critique promotional conventions within the publishing industry.

Language around blurbs can be slippery, but reviewing histories of early blurb use by the likes of Burgess and Whitman shows longstanding debate about the validity of promotion in publishing. The practice of soliciting quoted endorsements from influential authors or media outlets to print on book covers is a ubiquitous publicity tool in modern book marketing. Because blurbs are typically embedded in the materiality of books as peritext, they provide a historical snapshot of how publishers positioned a book to both industry and consumer readers at a given time.

In the late 20th century, corporate takeovers and increased competition for consumer attention contributed to the intensification of the role of marketing in publishing. Marketing logics began to permeate every stage of publishing as publishers acquired books based on their marketability and sought to create bestsellers. Marketing in publishing scholarship illuminates that the primary audience for blurbs in the initial release of a book is industry insiders whose recommendations and opinions about the marketability of a book can influence its circulation and reception. Ultimately, blurbs are an entry point for viewing how industry and media actions contribute to the visibility of books in a crowded literary marketplace.

Blurb case studies help publishing students learn marketing strategies, recognize publishing business decisions, and observe more nuanced publishing histories. Despite a 30-year gap in publication, the first editions of *The Joy Luck Club* (1989) and *Little Fires Everywhere* (2017) are noteworthy for including blurbs that indicate well-resourced marketing campaigns. Subsequent editions of each book, from film and TV tie-ins to

paperbacks that boast bestseller status, use blurbs to position each book to reach new audiences.

Structural critique of the publishing industry is important for identifying both the opportunities and limitations of blurbs. A focus on using commercially successful authors with public visibility for blurbs can reify the insular dynamics of publishing and put the weight of exceptionalism on marginalized authors' shoulders, without significant structural change. Blurbs can be professional favours, savvy business decisions, generous endorsements, or all of the above. They can be a powerful way to build community and uplift others, but marginalized authors are increasingly speaking out about the pressures of blurbing as unsustainable, additional labour.

Recommendations for Further Study

The study of blurbs would benefit from efforts to digitally archive book covers, marketing materials, and publishers' corporate histories. At present, anyone studying book covers and peritext is over-reliant on booksellers to provide book cover imagery. Amazon and Goodreads typically have the most image results, but their cataloguing can be unstable and unpredictable.¹⁴⁹ Book collectors' websites can be a treasure trove of older book covers but these websites can be inconsistent and difficult to navigate.

As Matthews remarks, "one challenge in trying to understand the impact of the marketing of books is the difficulty of obtaining even quite recent marketing materials."¹⁵⁰ More comprehensive study of blurbs requires access to publishing companies' business archives, in-depth interview processes with publishing professionals, and efforts to catalogue marketing campaigns and promotional materials. Lastly, the creation of a digital map to show blurb connections between books and authors could facilitate more understanding of blurb networks. This could be co-created as an industry resource, with different researchers adding plot points, and could even employ crowd-sourcing to

¹⁴⁹ When new editions of a book become available, retail websites sometimes use the newest book cover image for all previous editions of a book, effectively overwriting other covers that may have different blurbs. Also, it's common to remove cover copy (such as blurbs) to create a clearer thumbnail image of a book cover for online commercial purposes. Lastly, images of back covers (where blurbs are often located) are shown less frequently online than front covers.

¹⁵⁰ Matthews. "Introduction", xviii.

gather more data from readers to build a more holistic picture of *who* blurbs, how often, and to what end.

In his analysis of the changing spatial and temporal location of peritext, Genette observed that “stability is as much a historical fact as change.”¹⁵¹ As publishing and media industries continue to grapple with the pressures of corporate consolidation, technological advancement, and competition from other leisure industries, the relative stability of blurbs as a book marketing tactic, and the endurance of polarizing opinions surrounding blurbs, make them an advantageous site from which to study publishing.

¹⁵¹ Genette, *Paratexts*, 14.

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Appendix.

Case Study Blurbs

The Joy Luck Club, 1989 US Hardcover

Hardcover Dust Jacket Back Panel:

“Startlingly imaginative and moving...

Amy Tan’s first novel is a major achievement.” *

**Publishers Weekly*

“In this honest, moving, and beautifully courageous story Amy Tan shows us China, Chinese-American women and their families, and the mystery of the mother-daughter bond in ways that we have not experienced before.”

– Alice Walker

“Haunted by ghosts, rich with bone-chilling secrets and the miraculous connections between mothers and daughters, *The Joy Luck Club* is an extraordinary and beautiful book.”

– Alice Hoffman

“Amy Tan effortlessly mixes tenderness and bitter irony, sorrow and slicing wit. *The Joy Luck Club* is a fabulous concoction.”

– Louise Erdrich

***The Joy Luck Club*, 1993 US Film Tie-in Edition Paperback**

Front Cover:

“Beautifully written...A jewel of a book.” – *The New York Times Book Review*

Back Cover:

“Amy Tan’s brilliant novel flits in and out of many realities but all of them contain mothers and daughters... Each story is a fascinating vignette, and together they weave the reader through a world where the Moon Lady can grant any wish, where a child, promised in marriage at two and delivered at 12, can, with cunning, free herself; where a rich man’s concubine secures her daughter’s future by killing herself and where a woman can live on, knowing she has her entire life.” – *The Washington Post Book World*

***The Joy Luck Club*, 2019 30th Anniversary Paperback Edition**

Back cover:

“For me, it was one of those once-in-a-lifetime reading experiences that you cherish forever. It inspired me as a writer and still remains hugely inspirational.”

– KEVIN KWAN, author of *Crazy Rich Asians*

“You see the lives of these women, and you think about all the women who came before you... It’s among the canon of Asian American stories that are feminist and that are true to our being.” – MARGARET CHO

***Little Fires Everywhere* 2017 US Original Hardcover**

Hardcover Dust Jacket Front Panel:

“Witty, wise, and tender. It is a marvel. – Paula Hawkins, author of

THE GIRL ON THE TRAIN and INTO THE WATER

Hardcover Dust Jacket Back Panel:

“I read *Little Fires Everywhere* in a single, breathless sitting. With brilliance and beauty, Celeste Ng discusses a microcosm of American society just when we need to see it beneath the microscope: How do questions of race stack up against the comfort of privilege, and what role does that play in parenting? Is motherhood a bond forged by blood, or by love? And perhaps most important: Do the faults of our past determine what we deserve in the future? Be ready to be wowed by Ng’s writing – and unsettled by the mirror held up to one’s own self beliefs.”

– JODI PICOULT, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Small Great Thing* and *Leaving Time*

“*Little Fires Everywhere* takes us deep into other people’s homes and lives and darkest corners. Along the way, Celeste Ng is always witty, engrossing, unsparing, and original.

– MEG WOLITZER *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Interestings*

“*Little Fires Everywhere* is a dazzling protean work – a comedy of manners that doubles as a social novel and reads like a thriller. By turns wry, heartrending, and gimlet-eyed, it confirms Celeste Ng’s genius for gripping literary fiction.”

– PETER HO DAVIES, author of *The Fortunes*

“Yes, it’s the story of one Ohio town, but *Little Fires Everywhere* is not that familiar tale of the underside of the American suburb. It’s a powerful work about parenthood and politics, adolescent strife and artistic ambition, and the stark choice between conformity and community.” – RUMAAN ALAM, author of *Rich and Pretty*

“I cracked open this book midmorning and did not even move again until it was time to turn on a light. Celeste Ng once again proves she is a force to be reckoned with. *Little Fires Everywhere* is a deft, smouldering masterpiece.”

– MIRA JACOB, author of *The Sleepwalker’s Guide to Dancing*

“I was fascinated with, not to mention worried about and frightened for, these intriguing characters. Celeste Ng is a powerful and poignant writer whose attention to detail is pitch perfect. Her writing is honest and rich – and I love how little fires spread here until they’ve put out.”

– TERRY McMILLIAN, *New York Times* bestselling author of *I Almost Forgot About You*

“As I read Celeste Ng’s second novel I found myself thinking, again and again: How does she know so much? About all of us? How does she write with such perception, such marvelous grace, such daring and generosity? *Little Fires Everywhere* has the irresistible pace of an expertly tuned thriller and the observational brilliance of lasting literature. It marks Celeste Ng as a writer of the first rank, among the very best in her generation – right there with Zadie Smith and Jacqueline Woodson. I was mad for this book.”

– JOE HILL, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Fireman* and *Heart-Shaped Box*

***Little Fires Everywhere* 2019 US Paperback**

Front Cover:

“Utterly engrossing, often heartbreaking, deeply empathetic.” – *The New York Times Book Review*

Back Cover:

“I read *Little Fires Everywhere* in a single, breathless sitting.” – JODI PICOULT

“To say I love this book is an understatement...It moved me to tears.”

– REESE WITHERSPOON

***Little Fires Everywhere* 2020 US TV Tie-In Paperback Edition**

Front Cover:

“Utterly engrossing, often heartbreaking, deeply empathetic.” – *The New York Times Book Review*

Back Cover:

“I read *Little Fires Everywhere* in a single, breathless sitting.” – JODI PICOULT