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Editor's Notebook: Book Title Depletion: A National Crisis

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Although the depletion of irreplaceable natural resources has evoked extensive commentary and great public concern, almost no one has mentioned an equally alarming development -- the impending Book Title Depletion Crisis. In the five centuries since Gutenberg's invention, possible titles have been devoured at an ever-increasing rate by a print-hungry public. In the case of non-renewable energy resources, alternatives may be found; solar power, windmills and nuclear plants have already begun to replace coal and oil. Once a title has been used, however, it can almost never be used again. Consider just a few of the great titles that have been driven out of circulation: The Origin of Species, Gone With the Wind, The Communist Manifesto, War and Peace. Last year over 50,000 new books were published in the U.S. alone, which means another 50,000 titles removed from the pool of possible choices.

Signs of a crisis are beginning to proliferate. The development of the Long Title is one. Defenders of Long Titles argue that sometimes a lot of words are needed to explain what a book is about, but this is rarely the case. The meandering cuteness of Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex But Were Afraid to Ask could easily have been replaced with a direct, no-nonsense title like A Sex Guide. And When All You've Ever Wanted Isn't Enough manages to be long without giving the reader any idea of what the book is about.

An offshoot of the Long Title which has reached epidemic proportions lately is the Colon Title. A book which in a calmer age would have appeared as The Autobiography of Lee Iacocca, in 1986 is announced in abrupt staccato as Iacocca: An Autobiography. The first half of the Colon Title is usually short, catchy and misleading; as if by way of compensation, the second half is tediously accurate. Thus the concise ante-colon The Big Time: is followed by the ponderous The Harvard Business School's Most Successful Class -- and How It Shaped America. Ante-colons may be coyly suggestive, but the post-colon explanation can be relied on to resolve any ambiguity. The Lay of the Land: is not, as it turns out, about bizarre sexual practices; its real subject is revealed to be Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters.

Another notable trend is the growth of the Non-Sequitur Title, one which consists of incongruous or apparently unrelated terms -- such as Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance. Sexual Politics, another outstanding example of the Non-Sequitur, was naturally perplexing to those who thought that politics has something to do with government, and for whom this title could therefore call to mind only Rita Jenrette, the Profumo Scandal, and Wilbur Mills frolicking in the Tidal Basin. Although Sexual Politics has nothing to do with any of these, it was a trendsetter, to be followed by Sexual Chemistry, Sexual Geometry and Sexual Nutrition as well as The Politics of Housework and The Politics of Virginity. The Non-Sequitur Title achieves its greatest refinement in academic writing, where it is frequently combined with the Colon Title to produce such inscrutable masterpieces as The Political Unconscious: Narrative As a Socially Symbolic Act.

Book Titles can also be looked at from a sociological point of view. Thus, the popularity of The Joy of titles seems to reflect an obsession with pleasure. The current Books in Print lists more than 200 J oys, in contrast to only four titles beginning with Sadness and a mere two beginning with Misery. They range from The Joy of Automobile Repair to The Joy of Yoga. In between, there are Joys of Bach, Backpacking, Breastfeeding, Brewing, Backyard Boat Building, Being Sober, Being Thin, Belonging, Birding, Birth, Baroque, BASIC, Being a Woman, of Pasta, of Pizza, of Pigging Out, of Coaching Youth Soccer, and improbably, of Stress. The original of all these -- the Ur-Joy -- was apparently The Joy of Cooking, first published in 1931 and, presciently, the first to suggest that something people had always thought of as work could be re-defined as fun. Evidently we seek a good time where our ancestors saw work (auto repair, boat building) or basic human experiences (birth, breastfeeding, stress).

How can we as a nation best respond to the Book Title Crisis? I suggest that we bypass the customary task forces, special panels and blue ribbon commissions and seek legislation immediately. Congress must draft a "Truth in Titling" act, stipulating that all book titles properly enforced, would permit publication of such long-suppressed masterpieces of depressing accuracy as The Drudgery of Automobile Repair, The Fatigue of Backpacking, The Pain of Childbirth and The Agony of Coaching Youth Soccer.

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