

How to Review a Best-Seller

By JOHN TEBBEL

EVERY author, unless he is an insensitive lout, knows the awful moment when publication day arrives and he awaits the critics' verdict.

No matter what the author tells himself, he knows that he really cares very much what the critics say, and he is convinced that reviews can make or break him.

There are a few books annually that can be certain of getting the widest possible attention, by reason of their content, the reputation of their authors, or both. They may even be predestined best-sellers before the reviewer can express an opinion one way or the other.

One of these is Vance Packard's "The Waste Makers." I have no intention of getting into the pitched battle over Mr. Packard's book, but its critical reception by newspapers and magazines has offered serious students of these media a unique opportunity to examine the art, or business, of reviewing books in a more revealing way than any other book in recent times.

The reason for this is the special nature of "The Waste Makers" and its predecessors, "The Hidden Persuaders" and "The Status Seekers." Aside from the fact that the three were all number-one best-sellers, a feat roughly comparable to breaking the bank at Las Vegas, they were books calculated to provoke quite as much response from reviewers as from readers. They could not be dismissed with the usual clichés of reviewing, although a few obtuse critics tried it. These books seemed to bring out both the best and the worst in critics.

Violent reaction to "The Waste Makers" could be reasonably expected from the business press, especially the part of it devoted to advertising; but what of the other newspapers and magazines, equally dependent on advertising for their existence, and overwhelmingly conservative in their politics?

The answer to this question, as I found it, will not delight dogmatists of either persuasion—either those who think the press is helplessly in the grasp of advertising, or those who like to boast that it is wholly independent. I have just completed a study of 245 reviews of "The Waste Makers," gathered from various sources, representing not only a cross section of the reviewing media but also at least 70 per cent of the total reviews. I discovered:

To begin with, an anticipatory shudder went through the business world and its press even before "The Waste



—Roger Luce.
Vance Packard — author
of "The Waste Makers."

Makers" appeared on September 30, 1960. *Advertising Age* headlined an editorial in its August 8 issue "That Man's Here Again," but in announcing the forthcoming book confined itself largely to quoting three paragraphs from the introduction, without comment.

On September 20, an inter-office memo was circulated to the sales and editorial staff of *Sales Management*, suggesting that these employees read "The Waste Makers" whether they liked it or not, and pointing out with reverse pride that the magazine was quoted fourteen times in the book, more than any other source.

Before the publishers (David McKay) could get advance copies into the hands of reviewers, book editors around the country found in their mail a release from the vice president in charge of public relations at General Foods Corporation, beginning with ungrammatical directness: "You likely are reviewing Vance Packard's new book 'The Waste Makers' due to be published soon," and going on to call attention to an enclosure, which was a copy of a speech delivered at the Sales Executive Club in New York by Charles G. Mortimer, board chairman of General Foods.

In this address, titled "Consumer Persuasion—Black Art or Key to Economic Progress?" Mr. Mortimer remarked that "consumer persuasion" was "the key to economic progress. . . . The charge is made that business creates consumer wants which soon become needs. I, for one, plead guilty. In our way of life, needs and wants are indeed virtually synonymous."

The revelation of this PR ploy, which undoubtedly annoyed far more book

editors than it influenced, occurred in the book column of the Manchester (N. H.) *Evening Union Leader*, a paper scarcely noted for its liberalism. Dr. George Woodbury, the daily's literary editor, appeared to view this not-so-hidden attempt at persuasion with scorn.

Woodbury's column foreshadowed a surprising reaction from the conservative press—which is to say, most of it. Nearly all of these newspapers treated the book with middle-of-the-road caution, although it could hardly have failed to anger the publishers. A few even praised it. The book editor who wrote one of these favorable reviews later reported that the paper's editor chided him for his "too friendly" notice, but he was saved because the publisher himself had liked the book.

By an odd coincidence, several of the reviews in conservative papers ended on virtually the same note, seeming to back away from their preceding favorable comment and making references to "pie-in-the-sky, socialistic theorizing." But that was as near as most of them came to the standard conservative vocabulary. Even in cities like Detroit, where one might expect annoyance to boil over, the *Detroit News* review was favorable, though author Packard had dismembered the auto manufacturers and left them for dead.

THERE were exceptions, of course. A shrill Hearst voice was raised here and there. John Chamberlain, bellwether of the conservative flock, took an entire column of the *Wall Street Journal* to drive home the unimportance of the book and its author, and a solemn editorial accompanying it seized the occasion to remind the *Journal's* readers, who must have heard it somewhere before, that the greatest waste was "the gigantic waste of Government power and control."

In the New York *World-Telegram & Sun*, Richard Starnes, an ex-deskman elevated to the department of split-page cosmic thinking, belabored Packard and his book in prose that could be called inimitable if it had not become a Scripps-Howard trademark. However, the paper's television critic, Harriet Van Horne, who writes a first-rate prose all her own, gave Packard a friendly mention, and John Barkham's favorable review, distributed by the *Saturday Review* syndicate, appeared on another page.

The *World-Telegram* was not the only paper unable to make up its mind. Dissension appeared also in the pages of the New York *Post*, a liberal paper that might have been expected to love Packard's book. Its reviewer took a disparaging view of "The Waste Makers," but the paper's syndicated finan-

cial columnist, Sylvia Porter, gave it an enthusiastic sendoff. "Packard's sense of timing is breathtaking," Mrs. Porter declared. "... In this book I think Packard has caught a national trend in the making." (Mr. Packard may have been understandably confused to read later in the *Christian Science Monitor* that his book was "a little late.") The *Post's* drama critic, Richard Watts, Jr., added some approving comments.

One oddity among the major media was the Chicago *Tribune's* review. Robert Cromie, the amiable and able new editor of the *Tribune's* Sunday book section, decided on an unorthodox approach and gave the book for review to Neil C. Hurley, president of the Thor Power Tool Co., with entirely predictable results.

The syndicated reviewers, who must please as many as several hundred clients and are therefore not given to extremes, gave "The Waste Makers" good notices generally, but several of the clients saw fit to edit their copy in a manner familiar to working newspapermen everywhere. For example, W. G. Rogers's Associated Press review appeared in some papers with deletions obviously not dictated by reason of tight space. "Again Vance Packard strikes at the heart of a vital national problem" was a sentence that disappeared mysteriously in some AP papers.

THE pile of clippings I have been examining also exhibits the dismal lack of initiative in many American newspapers. Again and again appear the familiar phenomena, known to every publisher's publicity department, of the slightly rewritten press release and the unabashed plagiarism of jacket copy, along with the somewhat altered syndicated review, used without credit, or intact with neither by-line nor credit.

But taken as a whole, the treatment of Packard's controversial book by the newspaper reviewers and critics from New York to the Coast was fair and favorable, regardless of an individual paper's political leanings. Criticism was plentiful, but on balance it was judicious and good-tempered. (It may be argued that most newspaper reviewing is reporting, not criticism, but that is another debate.) Most reviewers and critics, it appears, operate independently and do not stand in fear of their editors and publishers, and management, for the most part, does not inhibit free expression in the book columns.

Unfortunately, the same cannot be said of the magazines. Their reaction was as curious as it was fascinating. The news magazines, which purport to cover the national scene, offered a strange example of nonreviewing. *Time* has never reviewed a Packard volume

in its book section. "The Hidden Persuaders" turned up in the Medicine department; "The Status Seekers" was ignored, although the magazine did carry an interview titled "Revisit to a Best-Selling Author," with a picture of Packard's Weimeraner dog, Misty, exhumed from the files of *Sports Illustrated*, to show that the author himself was a status seeker. "The Waste Makers" was ignored entirely, except for the appearance of its title at the top of *Time's* best-seller list, certainly a newsworthy event by any standard.

As for *Newsweek*, after giving the first two Packard volumes good notices in its book department, it assigned "The Waste Makers" to the Business department, where it was dismissed. The reviewer characterized Packard as "a glib, facile social thinker," once more confusing an author who had seen himself described in the San Francisco *Chronicle* as "a quiet, almost shy journalist and scholar."

David Lawrence's *United States News and World Report*, its mind probably concentrated on making adjustments in the nation's future, had no time for "The Waste Makers."

Turning to the other national magazines, two were remarkable (for different reasons) in their treatment of the book. *The New Yorker*, whose attitude toward books is usually one of cool disdain, produced a lead review by Naomi Bliven that could only be described as hysterical. From it one fact emerged: Mrs. Bliven simply hated that book.

More astonishing, however, was the frontal assault launched by *Printers' Ink*, a trade journal whose subtitle is "The Weekly Magazine of Advertising and Marketing." Its editor is Woodrow Wirsig, who was a student at Columbia's School of Journalism when Packard was a member of the faculty.

The cover of *Printers' Ink* for September 30, 1960, carried pictures of Packard; his publisher, Kenneth Rawson; and Rawson's wife, Eleanor, an associate editor at McKay, who was also once Packard's secretary. Beneath the pictures ran a blurb: "Is 'The Waste Makers' a hoax? Why did Vance Packard write it? Why did David McKay Co. publish it? *Printers' Ink* and seven outstanding ad men—Cummings, Frost, Zern, Kerr, Weir, Mithun and Cox—

explore these questions to try to find reasons for such a deliberate attack on advertising and marketing."

In the nine-page jungle of indignant prose beginning on page 20 there were few, if any, answers to the questions raised by the blurb, and the magazine's fanciful account of Packard's career offered little more information. But it was perfectly clear that ad agency executives hate Packard and all his works.

Publisher and author were delighted with this assault. In terms of lineage, it was book advertising no publisher could afford to buy. As public relations, it was a performance ranking somewhat below par. *Printers' Ink* had committed a publishing *faux pas*.

Obviously not aware of it, the magazine compounded its error in the October 21 issue by attacking the reviewers who had given Packard's book favorable reviews. In studying "more than a score" of reviews, the magazine said, it had found only three or four critics who had "any real understanding of marketing as practiced in this country today." No one was surprised to learn that these satisfactory critics included Mr. Hurley, the manufacturer who had written the Chicago *Tribune's* review; and Brian Beedham, Washington correspondent for *The Economist* of London, author of the New York *Post's* unfavorable notice.

By contrast, the journal of the ad industry, *Advertising Age*, gave Packard's book a thoughtful, restrained review. In its subsequent editorial comment, *Advertising Age* appeared to be obliquely criticizing its competitor, *Printers' Ink*.

Printers' Ink squeezed some extra mileage out of its attack by reprinting parts of it in a magazine called *Salesweek*, "The International News Magazine for Sales and Marketing Executives," published by the same company.

IF any conclusion can be drawn from the 245 reviews I studied, it is this:

That a controversial book published in America need not fear unreasonable attack, even from those newspapers that disagree most, with but a few exceptions. One cannot expect as much from magazines, however, especially when their highly vulnerable bank accounts are threatened, or when their predominantly conservative convictions are challenged.

We have seen the magazine business strike back before. Dr. Kinsey, for example, was pilloried by one of the most influential magazines in the country, and there have been a good many similar instances. No doubt it will happen again.

Publishers, whether of newspapers or magazines, are often slow learners.



How to Be a Perfect Speller

By RUDOLF FLESCH

SPELLING is the stepchild of our scientific age. Unlike other universal problems such as the common cold or obesity, it isn't even an object of current research or scientific interest. To a scientist, spelling is simply a nuisance, the relic of a prescientific age—something that will sooner or later go away. The famous linguist Leonard Bloomfield, in his book "Language," winds up his discussion of spelling with the hope that "mechanical devices for reproducing speech will supersede our present habits of writing and printing." Another famous linguist, E. H. Sturtevant, in his "Introduction to Linguistic Science," wryly suggests that "the most efficient as well as the easiest way to improve the situation would be the complete cessation of the teaching of spelling."

So there's no hope at all from that quarter. Meanwhile, you and I and everybody else have trouble with spelling, and the man-hours lost to the nation in hunting through dictionaries and correcting errors run into millions, particularly at the level of professional writing.

What can the ordinary person do to improve his spelling? The usual advice is to memorize spelling lists until your weaknesses are overcome. But experience shows that this is no good at all. I've stared at the words *harass* and *embarrass* on spelling lists ever since I can remember and still have to look up *harass* every time I want to use that word in writing—or rather, I had to, until I hit upon the simple method explained in this article.

The main point about spelling is that you have to use psychology. Psychology tells us that for memorizing

anything we have to use the principle of association. We memorize Mrs. Farington's name by reminding ourselves that she lives *far* away: we remember our aunt's telephone number (LYric 2-9918) by mumbling to ourselves that nine and nine make eighteen.

So with spelling. A spelling list that tells us that a *tail* is an appendage attached to the hind part of an animal, while a *tale* is a story, is of no use at all when it comes to distinguishing between the spellings for the two different meanings. We might be told that a *tail ails* when it itches, while *tales* are told with cheese and *ale*.

On that principle I've drawn up my own little private spelling list, which is printed below. For me, it works. But before I pass it on to you, let's first recapitulate a few general rules.

1. To be a good speller, remember the basic rules of English phonetic spelling—or, if you've never learned them, learn them now.

First, consonants: There's only one spelling for almost all consonant sounds—or rather, written consonants are usually sounded in just one regular way. The great exceptions are *c* and *g*, which are sounded hard (as in *call* and *gall*) except before *i* and *e*, when they are

Dr. Flesch's Own Spelling Associations

accidentally. There's a *tally* in *accidentally*.

accurate. *Accuracy* is the only *cure* for mistakes.

address. On second-class mail, the *address* is the *ad dress*.

adviser. Even an *adviser* may *err*.

aging. Drinking *gin* speeds *aging*.

all right—already. The *two* of them are *all right*; they're *already together*.

battalion. The *battalion* fought like a *lion*.

bogey. Keep your *eye* on the ball.

Britain. *Britain* wanted to *retain* her empire.

buses. *Buses* have many *uses*.

collar. A collar in a *large* size.

colossal. *Colossal* movies are in *color*.

comparison. The *comparison* shopper went to *Paris*.

compliment. *Compliments* flatter the ego—the *I*.

costume. *Costumes* cost money.

counsel. A *counsel* sells his advice.

custom. Don't *cuss* when you go through *customs*.

dependent. *Dependents* must be taken to the *dentist*.

describe. The description is on your *desk*.

diary. In a *diary*, the *I* comes first.

dumfounded. I was so *dumfounded* I lost a *b*.

embarrass. *Embarrassment* is a *barrier* to conversation.

exhilarating. It's exhilarating to walk up a *hill*.

forty. *Forty* soldiers held the *fort*.

gorilla. The dead *gorilla* was a gory sight.

gypsy. I'm not a *gypsy*.

hangar. A *hangar* is an airplane *garage*.

harass. *Harassed* as a hunted *hare*.

hypocrisy. *Hypocrisy* can produce a *crisis*.

imminent. It can happen any *minute*.

incidentally. There's a *tally* in *incidentally*.

indispensable. As indispensable as *sable*.

loose. A *moose* let *loose*.

mantel. There's a *telephone* on the *mantel*.

mortgage. *Mortals* are apt to die before the *mortgage* is paid off.

mustache. His *mustache* was *musty* and *dusty*.

nickel. It cost a *nickel* to ride the old *el*.

obligato. A steady *obligato* of *b-b-b-b*.

paid. To be *paid* is an *aid*.

parallel. *All el* tracks are *parallel*.

pendant. My *aunt* wore a *pendant*.

playwright. Some playwrights are carpenters rather than writers.

pygmy. I'm not a *pygmy*.

resin. They decided to *re-sin*.

sacrilegious. *Sacrilegious* is the opposite of *religious*.

separate. To *separate* means to set *apart*.

sibyl. The *sibyl* lived nearby.

siege. The besieged city was down to one *egg*.

sieve. They used a *sieve* for the *evening* meal.

stationary. He made *nary* a *move*.

stationery. *One* pen, *one* pencil, *one* sheet of paper.

succeed—success. He *succeeded* in *doubling* his fortune.

supersede. When you're being superseded, take a *sedative*.

surprise. A *burp* gives *rise* to *surprise*.

their. *Their* house was left to an *heir*.

there. *There* is not *here*.

villain. That's the *villa* in which the *villain* lives.