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Blockbuster Magic

by Tim Sullivan

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SAM ISLAND

What is a hit? This is a seemingly simple question. Pick a medium, and anyone can give you a satisfying example: the Harry Potter series, a Malcolm Gladwell book, Drake's "Hotline Bling," *Jaws*. We know one when we see one. Yet *ex ante* the answer to the question is far more difficult. How can you identify a hit before it becomes one—or, even more challenging, use the characteristics of hits generally to produce another? As the screenwriter William Goldman quipped, "Nobody knows anything."

Well, that's not entirely true, as Derek Thompson shows in his charming and probing book *Hit Makers: Why Things Become Popular*. Thompson, a senior editor at the *Atlantic,* set out to see if he could identify "the secret to making products that people like" and why "some products fail...while similar ideas catch on and become massive hits." In exploring these two questions, he takes us on a ride through the birth of impressionism, the psychology of how sound becomes music, the power of story and networks, and the characteristics of cultural marketplaces—all of which may sound like familiar territory, mined by others in similar social science-driven books. But Thompson combines research, new stories (such as the rise of *Fifty Shades of Gray,* the popularity of Taylor Swift and *Game of Thrones,* and how the *Mona Lisa* became the world's most famous painting), and a fluid writing style to produce a work that feels fresh.

Thompson emphasizes the critical tension between neophilia and neophobia—the fact that audiences love and crave new stuff even as they fear it. The trick is to find the sweet spot that cleaves to enough convention to appeal to a core audience even as it offers something surprising—what Thompson calls an "aesthetic aha." He notes, however, that good content is not enough, and so he devotes the second half of the book to ideas about how hits spread and take off.

Thompson is also aware that he's trying to do the very thing he's writing about: publish a hit book. If he hopes to succeed, he must follow the rules of the genre—let's call it "Gladwellian nonfiction"—while providing his own moment of aesthetic aha. And if he manages to do so but still fails to break onto the best-seller list, he'll have to explain his failure.

Thompson navigates this terrain by letting the reader inside his process. He breaks the fourth wall with asides that let you know that he knows that nothing is as sure as pop science writers make it seem. He acknowledges that there's no magic formula. You can aim for a hit, but nothing guarantees success. "My grind and my time...That's all anybody can hope to control," he writes. "The rest is magic sprinkle dust."

Where, one might ask, does such dust come from? You can find a huge heaping mountain of it in the 700-plus pages of James Andrew Miller's *Powerhouse: The Untold Story of Hollywood's Creative Artists Agency*. Founded by five agents who left the venerable William Morris in 1975, CAA is the talent agency behind a who's who of Hollywood stars. The conceit of the book—told oral-history style through interviews with the principals and others—may not grab you at first. Who wants to look inside a talent agency?

But Miller provides a fun and fascinating dive into the personalities and egos, the power struggles and power lunches, the scheming and betrayal, that go into the manufacture of hits. You'll recognize the boldface names—from Tom Cruise and Will Smith to Natalie Portman and Sarah Jessica Parker—and I recommend the book to anyone with a remote interest in celebrity gossip. But Miller's account also offers insight into the way CAA rewrote the rules for how agents work and reshaped the entertainment industry while building an empire.

After all, hit makers are moneymakers. This argument has been questioned in recent years by proponents of the "long tail" theory, most notably *Wired*'s former editor in chief Chris Anderson. Why try to produce hits if the real money is going to come from the ongoing availability of every product in the world over an infinite horizon? We can just sit back and reap the benefits of digital ubiquity.

Anita Elberse—a professor at Harvard Business School who studies the anatomy of hits and has written cases on topics ranging from the Broadway musical *Hamilton* to Beyoncé to LeBron James to the Metropolitan Opera—puts that logic to rest, arguing that hits are still the surest path to long-term success. "Although advances in digital technologies may at first blush seem to have a 'democratizing' influence," she writes in her 2013 book *Blockbusters: Hit-making, Risk-taking, and the Big Business of Entertainment*, "in reality they tend to have the opposite effect: they foster concentration and a winner-take-all dynamic."

Yes, blockbusters can be massively expensive to create and market, and many attempts to achieve them will fail. But it is those mainstream, wildly popular films, songs, TV shows, and products—bolstered by Thompson's aesthetic ahas and behind-the-scenes orchestration by talent agencies—that produce personal and business fortunes.

So maybe somebody knows something after all.

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1 COMMENTS

Clement Gavi 8 days ago

The mention of 'medium' is interesting for it opts toward a theory called 'medium objects' that considers there are things out there which are not obvious but which in certain circumstances can be capture by people who are sensitive. E.g the electricity is in the air and the storm makes it obvious. 'We know what we see' because we know what affects our sensitivities, sensitivity being one of the faculties use in knowledge it preceeds the exteriority (the underlying of knowledge) that comes and affect. There is somehow collective consciousness that can explain the fact that

in seeing, hearing, feeling something it can lead to the conclusion that many would be affect likewise.

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