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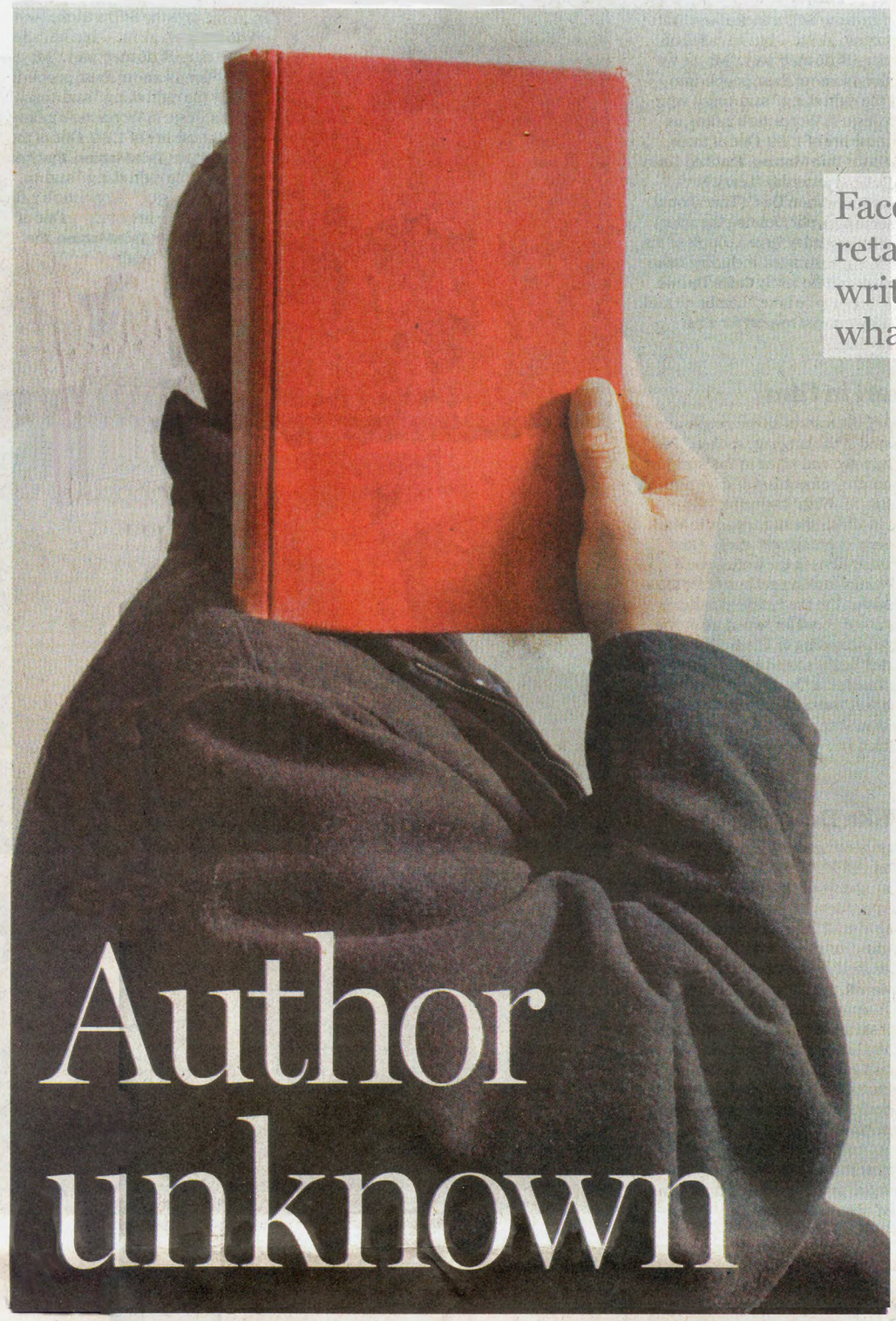
Living | Arts



Author unknown

Faced with lukewarm retailer interest, some writers have discovered what's in a name

By David Mehegan
GLOBE STAFF

Paul Garrison is tired. The man of the sea, with a permanent squint from scanning a thousand horizons, is tired of the games, the disguises, the elaborate cover stories. He's through with deceiving friends, colleagues, and clients. After years in the shadows, he is throwing off his mask and revealing his true identity.

After publishing several books under his real name and a few under pen names known to his publishers, the man who is Paul Garrison went undercover. He became the swashbuckling mariner who spends as much time as he can at sea — except when managing business interests from his Hong Kong base. He published five novels of adventure on the high seas with HarperCollins, landed lucrative movie deals (no movies have been made yet), and enjoyed healthy sales in Europe. Yet, until yesterday, not even HarperCollins knew the truth.

More than a story of one writer's life, this is a story of modern publishing, where a flat or falling sales record can stick to an author like bad breath or an ugly tattoo, where booksellers' fixed ideas of who a writer is and what he's capable of can freeze or end his career.

In yesterday's book world, no one except publisher and author — and sometimes not even author — knew how many copies of a book were sold. Sales figures were proprietary. Books were sold by thousands of small stores, which would order a dozen copies or fewer. Today bookselling is dominated by a handful of large outlets, notably Barnes & Noble, Borders, Amazon.com, and Books-a-Million, that make huge orders and keep detailed computer records. Also today there is Nielsen Bookscan, a national book-sales rating service by the company that tracks television viewership.

When a veteran writer's agent submits a manuscript to a new publisher, the publisher calls Bookscan to check the writer's track record — "the track" — to see how many copies of previous books were sold. If the numbers are flat or trending down, the publisher may pass. Even with an established relationship, a publisher may refuse a writer's new book if earlier titles have not met expectations.

"It can absolutely bite you in the butt," said Boston literary agent Doe Coover. "You're only as good as your last sales figures." New York agent Philip Spitzer added, "You can write your best book and not get published, if your last book didn't sell. It's stupid and narrow-minded and drives us crazy."

"The problem has become more pronounced with the increased influence of

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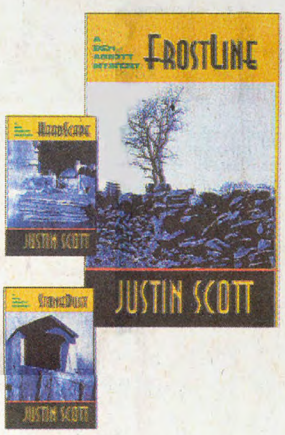
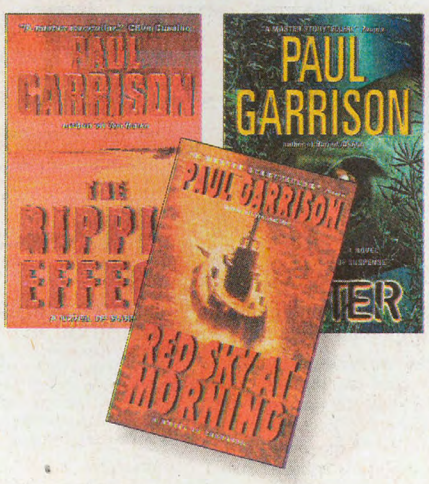


Double identity

Justin Scott wrote thrillers and mysteries under his own name until the 1990s. But when he found himself pigeonholed as a mystery writer, he turned to a pen name — Paul Garrison, complete with his own back story and birthday — to put out the sequel to his one of his own books. He even hid his alter ego from his publisher.



Going undercover to derail 'the track'

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booksellers in the acquisition of books," said New York agent Henry Dunow. "Publishers know that booksellers obey what their computers tell them. If they took 20,000 copies of an author's previous book and returned 60 percent, they'll take 9,000 the next time out."

Publishers say they still take on writers with weak tracks if they believe a new book is a promising departure from the old. Yet they confirm the trend is real. "You can't talk to the big retailers," said Otto Penzler, founder of the Mysterious Press and now publisher of Otto Penzler Books, a mystery imprint at Harcourt. "They look at their computers, and that's it. It's a serious problem that dooms writers."

An increasing number of desperate writers are reinventing themselves, agents say, in an effort to fool the track. Some agents oppose the practice — "It's a terrible thing to ask authors to abandon their names," Dunow said — but others recommend it.

"The reality is that [publishers] tend to react more positively if they think they are getting something from a brand-new author," said Henry Morrison, a New York agent. "It adds excitement."

'Magician's' trick

One who pulled it off is San Francisco crime-novelist William Bayer.

"In the 1990s," said Bayer, 67, "I had two New York Times bestsellers. Afterward, my sales flattened or went down. The problem was not with the publisher but with the chains and their tracking. So I wrote 'The Magician's Tale,' went to my agent, and said, 'I want you to show this anonymously or under another name.'" The agent refused, so Bayer found another agent, who was also reluctant but had a clever idea.

"He said, 'I don't like to play games,'" said Bayer. "'I'll send it out without a name and say, Just read the book. If you think it's worth something, make me an offer, and then I'll tell you who it is.'" G.B. Putnam made what's known as a pre-emptive offer — a generous bid on the condition that the book be withdrawn from other bidders. But Phyllis Grann, Putnam's CEO, wanted to know who the author was. "When the agent told her, she said, 'Oh, he's good, I read "Switch" [Bayer's 1993 thriller],'" Bayer said. "'But we think it can do better if it came out with another name.'"

So a gambit designed to outwit the track became part of the publisher's marketing plan. Bayer became David Hunt in a $1 million, two-book deal for "The Magician's Tale," published in 1998, and "Trick of Light."

Did it work? Sort of.

"A lot of copies were taken by the chains and independents," Bayer said. "People liked the books, but they didn't sell as well as expected." Still, he's not complaining. "I got a ton of money here and in Europe," he said. "I'm very popular in France. It worked for me."

At least Putnam knew who David Hunt really was. But almost nobody knew the truth about Justin Scott.

Identity crisis

Scott, 62, had published four mystery novels under his own name, beginning with "Many Happy Returns," in 1973. In 1978 he turned to thrillers, which have bigger printings and more bestseller potential than mysteries. His biggest was "The Shipkiller," in 1978, and he wrote eight more, still as Scott, ending with "Treasure Island: A Modern Novel," in 1994. Several books were sold to Hollywood, though no movies were made.

"I had a good time, writing big books," said Scott, who lives in Newtown, Conn. "In the '90s I wanted to do mysteries again, and I started a new series [the Ben Abbott series] that was well received."

In the 1990s Scott wrote "Fire and Ice," a sequel to "The Shipkiller," and expected to publish it as himself. But Henry Morrison, his agent, was concerned that after several Ben Abbott titles, his client was now known as a mystery writer and, with that track record, wouldn't be accepted as a writer of thrillers. It was no small matter. "In commercial fiction," Scott explained, "there's a huge gulf in sales between mysteries and thrillers." So Morrison suggested that the writer reinvent himself.

'You can write your best book and not get published, if your last book didn't sell. It's stupid.'
Agent Philip Spitzer

"Suddenly I was Paul Garrison," Scott said. "I completely started over. We gave him an identity: He would be an international businessman based in Hong Kong. People love a good story. It was the story of Paul." The book jackets describe him as the grandson of a sailor "who wandered the South Seas in the last of the square-rigged trading vessels."

HarperCollins's William Morrow division published "Fire and Ice" in 1998 under Paul Garrison's name. "We made a nice publishing deal here and abroad," Scott said. "We made a Hollywood deal." But Morrison worried that Hollywood might balk when it came to actually producing a movie unless it was confident that the author was a real person. He suggested registering Garrison with the Library of Congress. They consulted a copyright lawyer. "The lawyer says, 'OK, we can do this. We have to create an identity.' He looks at me and says, 'How old do you want to be? I need a birthday.' I thought this was fabulous and knocked 10 years off my age."

He wrestled at first with the ethics of writing incognito but decided it was acceptable.

"Was anyone being ripped off?" he asks. "The publisher doesn't buy a book they don't like, and the same is true of the readers. The books are real. Was anyone lied to? Yes, the computer that tracks sales and categorizes writers, that says, 'Justin Scott, he's a mystery writer. He sold six books last time — great, we'll buy five this time.' That computer was lied to."

Hiding in plain sight

Normally, editors want to meet a writer. But Morrison could put them off by saying Garrison was busy in Hong Kong. He couldn't possibly do signings or go on tour. Not a marquee name like Tom Clancy or Michael Crichton, Garrison went through several editors at HarperCollins/Morrow, and met none of them in person. As an "international businessman," he found that he had more clout in negotiating contracts than Scott had ever had. Four Garrison novels followed "Fire and Ice," ending with "The Ripple Effect" in 2004.

"There was no reason to tell," Scott said. "The books got fabulous reviews."

The game was fun, but there were awkward moments. Years passed with no books by Justin Scott, and friends would ask, "When are you coming out with a new book?" He would tell them he was working on something big. Then Garrison was invited to a fancy book soiree at the Barbican, a prestigious cultural center in London. It was to be a huge bash, thick with the glitterati. But Scott declined, sadly — too many people in British publishing knew him, and his cover would be blown. "Paul and I couldn't enjoy these little victories," he said.

Then he had an idea. "I wrote to London and said, 'I'll be passing through London. I'll be having lunch with the writer Justin Scott and his fiancee. Could they come too?' They said, 'Why not?'"

So Scott went to the party as himself, rubbing elbows with the elite of British publishing amid choice food and flowing champagne, and brought along his old friend John Mincarelli to play Garrison. Mincarelli, a professor of fashion merchandising at New York's Fashion Institute of Technology, "is strikingly handsome," says Scott, and naturally was dressed like a million bucks. "My British editor falls completely in love with *him* — not with me." No one caught on.

But after eight years, Justin Scott is tired of Paul Garrison. "Paul has gone sailing," he said. "Justin has reemerged with a new novel in the Ben Abbott series, in December ["McMansion," from Poison Pen Press]. I'm turning the Garrison website [www.seastoriesbypaulgarrison.com] into the Garrison/Justin Scott website." Future books will list Scott's and Garrison's previous books opposite the title page. He says he was going to come clean with HarperCollins soon but agreed to spill the beans for this story.

(Harper Collins learned the truth yesterday from the Globe, but did not return a call by press time.)

Why come in from the cold now? Why send Paul Garrison on an endless sailing trip? Because, after five novels, Garrison has a track record.

"I never sold enough to make Garrison a bestseller," Scott said. "I'm sure the publisher would say, 'If we don't see a clear route to a bestseller soon, we'll move on to the next writer.' They can't afford to stay with someone more than five or six books."

Besides, it's lonely being an international businessman based in Hong Kong who communicates only by e-mail.

"It's really nice," said Justin Scott, "to be able to meet my editors face-to-face and have dinner."

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THOMAS MCDONALD FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

After publishing several books in the Ben Abbott mystery series, author Justin Scott began writing as Paul Garrison to get publishers to accept his work when he returned to thrillers.