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EDITORIAL

The Art of the Deal

When a publisher starts talking about a book as "an experience that transcends the book itself," you know that what matters isn't going to be the writing. What matters is the synergy, as they used to call it in the good old AOL Time Warner days.

The book in question is "Cathy's Book," a novel for adolescent girls featuring a heroine who gives tips on makeup while the story unfolds. As it happens, the makeup she uses is by Cover Girl, which, in return for product placement, has agreed to feature the novel prominently on a Web site it runs for girls of the very age group likely to buy "Cathy's Book." If nothing else, this deal is a reminder that writers will nearly always take publicity if they can't get cash.

But this deal is also a reminder that it's almost ridiculous to speak of a "book" or a "record" or even a "movie" anymore. What we should be talking about is different states of the same cultural matrix — the way ice, water, and steam are different states of H₂O. Sure, there are writers out there intent on writing a "book," just as there are musicians intent on making a "record." But for projects of a certain ilk — a much better word than genre, somehow — the real artistry lies in the elusive way so many cultural threads are tied into a single knot. It's easy enough to bemoan a project like "Cathy's Book," and yet it captures the weird coalescence of the shape-shifting culture adolescent girls live in, where the borders between advertising and literature, podcast and sitcom, novel and lipstick go unpatrolled.

When you think about it, literature must seem to young readers like a strangely antiseptic universe, wholly devoid of the art form they know best: advertising. It's a fair bet that an ordinary young American has absorbed far more "content" — to use a synergistic word — derived from advertising than from almost any other source. Marketing products in literature intended for young readers is still a terrible idea, of course. If nothing else, books should remind them that there once was a time when life was not entirely about shopping.

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