



Charles Martin

inspiring stuff

BLURB writers are in crisis right now. They've been blurbing since long before Gelett Burgess invented the word. Year after year, the blurbs have inflated, until, at the end of the century, we are more or less blurbed out. No claim remains unmade, no praise unshowered, no fulsome compliment unpaid to some book somewhere on the shelves, and most likely an unworthy one.

Worse, the pressure to think up new and better blurbs remains. With thousands of books out there competing for our time, who will bother reading something that is described merely as "good" or even "very good"? People are busy nowadays and they want to know that whatever they read will be worth the sacrificed video-watching time.

Over the years, the techniques of blurbists have congealed into a number of schools, all of which practise their art most enthusiastically in the arena of the best-seller.

First, there is the hyphen school: "A fast-paced, page-turning, eye-opening, heavy-breathing, un-putdownable all-night-reader with an earth-shattering never-to-be-forgotten super-climax in a merry-go-round by a cul-de-sac in Aix-en-Provence."

Then the simile school, in which resides much corn. One Florida thriller supposedly has "characters flashier than a Key West sunset and dialogue tastier than a conch stew". Another reviewer, coincidentally, found it "as crisp as a fresh hundred-dollar bill". Tom Robbins, a specialist in over-the-top phrasing, wrote, "Todd McEwen can turn a phrase on two wheels and blow diamond dust out of the exhaust pipe."

The moving company school: "Move over, John Grisham." "Move over, Stephen King." And so forth. You haven't really arrived in the literary world until you're asked to move over.

There's what has been described as the adverb-adjective-noun school: "A searingly suspenseful look at a profoundly disturbing subject, written in deftly crafted phrases and filled with deeply engaging characters who, in the course of an intriguingly complex narrative, lead us to discover distinctly compelling truths about poorly cooked vegetables."

The oxymoron school: the *Road To Wellville* is "hilarious and harrowing". Anything from Eastern Europe is insanely funny and deeply disturbing at the same time.

The cliché school: some reviewers won't even take the time to pick up a thesaurus but choose from the top six adjectives: 6: original. 5: gripping. 4: dazzling. 3: fast-moving. 2: powerful. And the winner is: 1: compelling. Did you know that eight out of 10 books published today are compelling?

The cocktail party school, in which everyone meets everyone else. In Todd Komarnicki's *Free*, "Raymond Chandler meets William Burroughs." Martin Amis' *Other People* is, "Kafka reshot in the style of *Psycho*." It's a cheap but effective way of praising a book while letting readers know vaguely what they can expect. This technique is much beloved in Hollywood, where an idea cannot be sold until it can be encapsulated into *Sleepless In Seattle* meets *Night Of The Living Dead* or *The Lion King* meets *Reservoir Dogs*.

The school of exaggeration: this is perhaps the most entertaining school, because there is no need to take the reviewer seriously. Of Lionel Davidson's *Kolymsky Heights*, *New York Newsday* said, "The best thriller of this or any year." Come on now. Any year? Also falling into this school is any blurb using the phrase, "of our time".

The Frankenstein school, in which books take on movement and speech. According to Peter Straub, who should know, Robert Bloch's *The Night Of The Ripper* is "the sort of book that just grabs you and makes you read it". Sounds like something from one of his own horror novels. *The Bleeding Heart* "throbs with the hurts and passions of today's battle of the sexes". I'd think twice before reaching for a throbbing book.

And remember all those books that simply demand to be read? The imperative school: "If you read only one book this year. Obligatory reading." Or: "You simply cannot afford not to read it."

And the rarest of all, the understatement school, as in the *Manchester Times* on *Rescue Mission*: "Most readable."

I think I'll give that one a try.