



Arts in the News

'The 9/11 Commission Report' is summer's surprise bestseller

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"The 9/11 Commission Report" has become the sleeper literary blockbuster of the summer, exceeding all publishing-industry expectations. Since its release July 22, the report has topped online bestseller lists, and for the past three weeks, it has held the No. 1 spot on "The New York Times" paperback nonfiction list.

The report's official publisher, W.W. Norton, now has 1.1 million copies in print, and other publishers, including St. Martin's, have followed with their own editions. Barnes & Noble says it sees no slowdown in sales.

The 9-11 Commission even relates that readers are toting the official-looking, \$10 paperback to - yes - the beach.

So who, exactly, is snapping up this weighty tome of historical nonfiction? And are they actually reading it - or just adding it to a shelf of "books I really think I should own"?

After all, much of what's in the report has already been revealed in the media, the commission's hearings were widely televised, and the entire report is available online for free.

None of that matters, say those who follow the publishing industry. For myriad reasons, the story of the Sept. 11 tragedy is drawing a public hungry for a tangible piece of its legacy.

"This event really touched the lives of everybody in this country, in one way or another," says Louise Brockett, Norton's vice president and director for publicity. "It's not just people in New York, and it's not just people in Washington."

(Norton's president, Drake McFeely, has said it will take at least five more months before the publisher knows how much of a profit the report will generate. At least some of that money, he says, will go to a yet-to-be-named charity. The publisher also pledged to send a free copy of the report to each 9-11

victim's family.)

"The 9/11 Commission Report" isn't exactly Janet Evanovich, but book reviewers have praised it as eminently readable and momentous in its scope and depth. It's also horrifying, riveting, disturbing and, most important perhaps, real.

"Tuesday, September 11, 2001, dawned temperate and nearly cloudless in the eastern United States," begins the report's first section, ominously titled "We Have Some Planes."

"Everything that's in this book, we've lived through," says Barnes & Noble's vice president for merchandising, Bob Wietrak. "So it's all relevant."

Both he and Brockett say anecdotal evidence strongly suggests that people who are buying the report are reading it.

"It's very even-handed," Wietrak adds. "People find out how we got here and where we are and what this commission is recommending our country needs to do."

Mario Almonte, a public-relations professional in New York, bought the report and has read sections, going first to chapters that describe "the clues that the government missed" and how "no one really put it together," he says.

Almonte suggests that a certain segment of the report's audience is hoping for a kind of validation: Readers who oppose the Bush administration and those who support it are looking to the report, he says, "to sort of justify their positions."

Which is exactly how Fort Worth's Phil Moroneso ended up with a copy. Moroneso's "super liberal" son in Los Angeles sent it to Moroneso, a card-carrying Republican, hoping to change his dad's political viewpoint.

Will the 59-year-old Moroneso read the report? He's not sure.

"The question of the ages in publishing: They're buying it, but are they reading it?" says Judy Safern, a former senior publicist at HarperCollins Publishers.

"The truth is that there are certain titles that are prestige titles that people have to have on their shelves or on their coffee table or tucked under their arm, and this is one of them," notes Judy Safern, a former senior publicist at HarperCollins Publishers. A good example, she says: Bill Clinton's new autobiography. "Obviously, people are only reading the good parts," said Safern, who now runs her own Los Angeles-based business, LeadingThinkers PR, which represents authors.

"This is the book," she says of the 9-11 report, "that, just to be considered a thinking member of this society, you have to have a working knowledge of. Even if you're not going to crack the cover and all you know about it is what you heard on "Larry King," you kind of have to have the book."

Buyers of "The 9/11 Commission Report," she concludes, "are very unlikely - highly unlikely - to read it cover to cover."

Albert N. Greco agrees that most people are probably reading the report "in sections." And consumers do have a history of buying books, even government documents, simply as mementos. Take the Warren Commission report, he says.

But those aspects of the report's phenomenon are less interesting to Greco than the fact that the book is

flying off store shelves.

"It shouldn't have sold, but it did," says Greco, a professor of media management at Fordham University's graduate school of business. "It ran against all the patterns."

For one thing, history books usually make up only a small fraction of the books sold in the United States, explains Greco, who specializes in book publishing. For another, the people who buy the most books tend to be older (over 55) and wealthier (with incomes above \$60,000).

"We have to assume, because of the numbers being sold, that it wasn't just . . . the typical book buyer" picking up copies of the report.

Why?

Again, "It has those elements we associate with John Grisham," Greco says. "What happened to the FBI? What happened to the CIA? What were the presidents doing? What were their advisers saying?"

And though Greco foresees the book losing its sales momentum after the November presidential election, he does believe that the 9/11 report will "have legs," so to speak.

"I think it's the kind of book that will eventually find new audiences," he says, especially in university classrooms. "And that will keep it alive."

The 9-11 Commission has gone a long way toward assuring the report's longevity.

In its contract with Norton, the commission required four things of the publisher: to make the report affordable (\$10 for at least one year), to make the report immediately available (the day the commission released it), to print the report exactly as the commission wrote it (not a comma changed), and one more thing, according to Norton's Brockett.

"We pledged to keep the book in print," she says, "for generations."

(Liz Stevens is a Fort Worth Star-Telegram Features writer)

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