

The Business. A FORUM FOR VIEWS ON WRITING AND COMMUNICATION writer

SECRETS OF YOUR SENSES

Just as fine actors make us forget they are acting, fine writers make us forget we are reading. And sensory detail is the key, says regular contributor Hugh Vaughan-Williams. If we have the right sensory information the writer vanishes from our view and our brain is plugged directly into the scene.

Read this: Stopping the children at a blackberry bush, Alice pointed out clusters of ripe fruit. She picked one and ate it.

Now this: Stopping the children at a raspberry bush, Alice pointed out clusters of plump, pink fruit. She reached carefully between the thorns, took a berry and popped it in her mouth. A wave of tart, sweet juice flooded her tongue.

The first paragraph is perfectly okay and conveys its information well. But the second comes to life.

Being told the raspberries are ripe is one thing. Seeing them, (plump and purple) and tasting their juice (tart and sweet) is quite another.

Good writing is all about sensory detail.

Of course, it's no surprise that sensory information is so powerful. Our senses are the way we experience life: they feed us information and our intellect interprets it. And that is exactly what a good writer does: supplies readers with sensory information and let's their intellect interpret it: Bingo! The illusion of reality.

Actors know this. Think of Anthony Hopkins in *Silence of the Lambs*. Think of that strange, staccato sucking noise he made after saying he'd eaten someone's liver with a fine Chianti. We still remember that sensory detail long after we've forgotten the plot.

And there's a sensory detail about Hannibal that I'll bet you never knew. Remember those eyes? You didn't know the sensory detail that made them so chilling, but your subconscious did. Hannibal never blinks. Hopkins practised keeping his eyes open for long periods before making the film. Next time you see a re-run, check it out: No blinks.

Just as fine actors make us forget they are acting, fine writers make us forget we are reading. Again sensory detail is the key: if we have the right sensory information the writer vanishes from our view and our brain is plugged directly into the scene. Remember: When we read that the raspberries are 'ripe' we are being told they are ripe. But when we see them "plump and pink" we know they are ripe without being told it.

WHAT'S INSIDE

- Advice for business writers from a master storyteller Page 3
 - Your biggest problem, and how to get round it Page 6
 - Letting in the sunlight Page 7
-
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The illusion is complete; we are there.

Film and television have swamped the written word because they are usually more effective at conveying sensory information: filmmakers have to show us things, rather than telling us about them.

But don't despair: writers still have three real advantages over filmmakers. We have access to senses that filmmakers don't.

1) TASTE: In an article on rattlesnakes, writer Terry Dunkle, knowing the power of sensory detail, decided to find out what rattlesnake tastes like. He asked an old hunter to catch a rattler and cook it.

Continued page 2

Continued from page 1

He wrote: I ate it – some of it – and it wasn't like chicken at all. It was white, and rubbery and bland, with a hint of musk, like squid cooked in mutton fat.

So powerful are these details, that they come back to me years later, every time I hear about somebody eating a snake.

2) SMELL. First this: Next morning the suburb of Turramurra was returning to normal after the storm of the night before. The ground had begun to dry and men were out mowing their lawns.

Now this:

The puddles from last night's storm in Turramurra were now only damp patches on the footpath and the air smelled of wet concrete and freshly-mown grass.

When we are told that the ground in Turramurra is drying out and the lawns are being mown and that life is returning to normal, it's the writer who is telling us that. But the moment we smell newly-mown grass, we know that things are getting back to normal. We are getting our information direct; there is no writer in the way.

Oh, and just in case you think sensory detail wastes words, it doesn't. That first paragraph is five words shorter than the second. It is written more effectively and uses fewer words to do it.

3) TOUCH: There was a gush of warm wind and the subway platform trembled slightly under Melissa's feet. A train was coming. Enough said: Try showing that on film!

How can you use these techniques to bring life to your public affairs and business writing and make it more compelling?

Let's say you've been asked to do a piece on a corporate publishing centre – one of those places that does bulk printing. You could start like this:

The car parks at Global Headquarters are just beginning to fill, as I push open the main door of the publishing centre. I'm met by a warm gust of air, the clatter of the presses and the smell of hot coffee. "We start early here," smiles supervisor Alice Page.

We are right in the room, feeling the warm air, smelling the coffee,

surrounded the clatter of machinery and seeing Alice smile.

Whenever you want to bring something, or someone to life, just give readers some well-chosen sensory clues. It's as easy as that.

Let me leave you with one last example of the power of sensory detail.

Like all of us, I watched the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Centre on television. But, after seeing it unfold and then reading thousands of words about it, I still didn't fully comprehend what it was like to be right there. Until I read this: As they jumped from the ledges, some office workers held down their skirts. Others, in groups, held hands as they fell into the void.

I see gentle, modest, ordinary people caught up in an unimaginable horror. Now I understand what it was like.

Hugh Vaughan-Williams is an internationally recognised authority on magazine writing. As a managing editor for Reader's Digest in the US, he was responsible for the content of 28 international editions. He has worked as an editor and writer on magazines and newspapers in Britain's Fleet Street, in South Africa, Australia and the US where he now runs his own editorial consulting and training agency.



EMAIL ETIQUETTE

You can save time and gain the gratitude of business contacts by improving your email etiquette. Here are some suggestions forwarded to us by a kind reader:

- Only include people in the "TO:" field from whom you'd like a response or action. Use "CC:" for information only – no immediate action is needed. Ask yourself whether it's really necessary to send or "CC" everybody on your distribution list. Is there a genuine business need for including certain parties? Can it be rationalised to fewer names?
- A phone call is often quicker than typing an email saga.

- Use "out of office" messages, if your system allows it, to let others know if you can't respond for more than a day or two.
- Don't use emails to clear up misunderstandings. In general this kind of communication should be done in person or over the phone.
- Watch what you say. Remember, anyone you send a message to could easily forward it to others, like your boss or co-workers, and it may be misunderstood or get you in trouble.
- Avoid sending messages when you're angry or frustrated. Cool off before you respond. When you do reply, first print out your message and read the hardcopy before sending it.

Usually sleeping on the issue helps add some perspective.

- Don't use emails for sensitive information or highly personal messages. Instead send letters, make a phone call or talk face-to-face.
- Six and out! Don't send an email back and forth more than six times. Pick up the phone and discuss the matter. Words can be misunderstood as they often miss the tone, inflection and story behind the words.
- Be careful of humour and sarcasm. They can be "read wrong." You may think it's funny. Some people may not.
- Use filters to aid your email management.

ADVICE FOR BUSINESS WRITERS FROM A MASTER STORYTELLER

From 1986 to 1993 Catherine Jinks worked for Westpac as a writer on its staff magazine. Today she's a critically acclaimed author of 24 books for adults and children. Her works are published in Australia, the US, UK, Germany, Poland, Spain and Portugal and have garnered numerous awards, making her one of a rare breed: a writer who's successfully transcended the divide between business writing and fiction.

As a writer you moved from corporate journalism to fiction writing. What lessons/techniques/tools did you learn as a business communicator that you were able to transfer to fiction writing? To begin with, let me say that I haven't been a business communicator for a very, very long time. Twelve years, to be exact. What I learned then – what I actually remember from that time – may not have as much relevance now.

As a business writer, I learned several things that influenced my fiction writing. At Westpac I was writing for a widely scattered audience, ranging in age from eighteen to eighty. I wasn't just aiming at managers, or at retirees, or at any really specific demographic; nor did I have the luxury of a captive audience. No one had to read what I wrote. What's more, I was often tackling the kind of subject that makes

most people's eyes glaze over. (Credit risk analysis, for example. Orientation training. Financial instruments.)

So I learned pretty quickly to keep it simple, interesting, pacy and human. These, of course, are the keys to good fiction writing as well. And once you've been a business communicator, fiction writing is a walk in the park. You have so much more freedom! But you have to work out how to control the car before you can become a formula-one racing driver. I definitely honed my writing skills as a business communicator before I started writing novels. It was damn good training.

The subject of your history thesis at university was *Sumptuary Legislation in Florence 1299-1500*. Your four-book Pagan series now being published in the UK and US is, in your own words, "a down-to-earth, warts-and-all tour of Jerusalem during the Middle Ages." Your two mediaeval thrillers *The Inquisitor* and *The Notary* are big hits in Germany. All of which puts your credentials as a mediaeval expert beyond doubt. As such, you must have mastered more than a handful of rhetorical devices to make copy more compelling. Can you share some with us?

To make historical fiction compelling, you have to make it more immediate. One way of doing this is to use the first person. The first person is *always* more palatable. In my Pagan books, I not only used a first person narrative – I even used the present tense. You can't get more immediate than that.

Another technique of immediacy is to ask direct questions. I've often started first-person chapters

with questions: "Ladies, I appeal to you – what makes a man?" This was a trick I learned from my years as a corporate communicator. If you ask a question, the reader will at least hang around long enough to find out the answer.

Most of all, if you want to convey excitement and immediacy, you have to feel at home. If you've immersed yourself in the period you're covering, there won't be a sense of distance when you write about it. That's the demanding side of historical fiction, though in many ways it's no more demanding than the mastery of any other subject. It's simply a matter of *knowing your stuff*. Like any good communicator.

At a global speechwriters conference we attended earlier this year, speaker after speaker stood up urging corporate communicators to ditch power points, slides, overheads and rather *tell the story*. Reviewers have seen the storytelling aspect of your books as one of their great strengths. Once again, can you share some secrets? I don't know if all my skills in this area will be of much interest to business communicators. The question of developing and sustaining a great character, for example, though crucial to the kind of storytelling that I do – won't be important to many corporate speechwriters. Nor am I entirely sure that storytelling is something you can learn. I think it's basically instinctive, and comes naturally to people who are both sensitive to their audience and easily bored. If you're easily bored, that's a great start. Continued page 4

“I get the feeling that a little bit of distance is necessary, when you’re a corporate journalist. Without it, you start using the jargon, forgetting to ask the questions, and generally not serving your audience as well as you should.”

Good storytelling is essentially a matter of expert pacing, no matter what the medium is. And pace is something you can probably learn best from studying the masters. Knowing where to put a climax, where to build tension, where to pull back and relax – that’s something you pick up when you read a lot, or watch a lot of cinema, or listen to a really top-class raconteur. One thing I can say here is that for writers, pace is not only about content, but about the way you put together sentences. A series of short film shots – the sort of thing film directors do when they’re covering a gun battle. Long and complex sentences give a slower, more relaxed feel.

You have to keep all this in mind, when you’re telling a story.

What books do you return to when you want to be inspired by great writing?

I can’t say I’m the sort of person who’s really inspired by other people’s writing. I’m more likely to be inspired by a place, or a film, or a story, or a face, or a piece of music – those are the things that trigger inspiration, for me. Moreover, I like and admire a vast number of books, not all of them because the writing is spectacular. You can enjoy a book, and return to it repeatedly, without necessarily wanting to

emulate the author. Sometimes, you enjoy and revere it *because* you could never hope to imitate it; it’s quite beyond you.

That said, I have to acknowledge that there are a number of writers whose expertise fills me with a deep and abiding sense of the most profound satisfaction. They never lag, they never put a foot wrong, they are absolute masters of the written word. Evelyn Waugh is (or was) one of them; his dialogue beggars belief. Jane Austen was another. Somerset Maugham’s style was practically flawless. The work of these authors has a clarity, a precision, an elegance that makes it deceptively simple, with a simplicity that almost no one else can ever hope to attain.

Whenever I read it, I come away knowing that I have to work harder. Which is inspiration of a sort, I suppose.

Can you talk a little about your years spent as a corporate journalist. What did you learn about business, about the corporate world and those who inhabit it when you were working for the bank?

I’ve got to be frank here – what I learned about corporations was that I didn’t belong in one. Don’t get me wrong; there were a lot of nice people working with me.

And it wasn’t as if I didn’t enjoy my job, a good deal of the time. And it’s not as if I’m some sort of wacky eccentric, with a desperate need for thrills, chills and spills. But I wasn’t interested in climbing the corporate ladder, I couldn’t quite master the jargon, and I basically had no ambitions in the corporate sphere. I kept my distance, in other words – perhaps my goals were more literary.

On the other hand, I get the feeling that a little bit of distance is necessary, when you’re a

corporate journalist. Without it, you start using the jargon, forgetting to ask the questions, and generally not serving your audience as well as you should.

You’ve won awards as a fiction writer, but you also won numerous awards as a business writer. How in those days did you make what you were writing interesting? How did you paint pictures in your readers’ minds?

One way of keeping an audience interested was to quote direct speech. (As Alice in Wonderland said, what’s the use of a book with no pictures or conversations?) *Kicking off* with a quote is particularly helpful, providing the quote’s got a bit of punch to it. And you can usually find a quote like that, because most people will loosen up enough to give you something genuine, if you work on them a little. (The problem *then* is to get it past the censors.)

Another tip is to keep things concrete. Rather than using electronics to communicate, visit workplaces. Conduct face-to-face interviews. Do that, and you not only get a better sense of what you’re writing about; you also pick up concrete details – about process, about environments, about customers – that you can use to pep up the blandest theory.

My next piece of advice is this: always collect stories. I don’t care what you’re writing about – there are always stories associated with it. I used to pounce on people’s little accounts of “a customer I once dealt with…” or “the first time I ever did so-and-so” the way a miner might pounce on a tiny, shining gem. If you have to wander off on a tangent during the interview to score this stuff, then do it.

Finally, try to keep your focus on people. It doesn’t matter what

Continued page 5

Continued page 4

theoretical realm you stray into, there's always a person at the bottom of it all. That person is your hook and your anchor. People relate to people. If there's a name, a face, an *individual* somewhere in the piece, you're way ahead already.

In your experience what role do corporate communicators play in an organisation?

I had two roles. The first was to create a "family" feeling within the company. That was fine – no problem. My second role was more difficult. It was as a go-between. I was supposed to be helping senior management communicate with other levels of management, and with staff. This meant that, essentially, the staff were my audience. Now, if you're a good communicator, you identify with your audience. (Otherwise, you wouldn't know what buttons to push.) You not only identify, you sympathise. That's why it wasn't easy for me to flog some of the programs and ideas that senior management were trying to push. There was a tendency to weed out negative issue, to avoid the hard questions, to massage strong language and so on, and so forth. The usual bureaucratic stuff. You often found yourself between a rock and a hard place. Staff wanted you to report; management wanted you to sell.

Can you think of an example or two of what *not* to do as a business communicator?

Never, never start using the buzz-words. Or the jargon. Start doing that, and true comprehension just flies out the door. Bureaucratic language is designed to blur the edges. When I was in the bank, you only had to look in the internal directory, at the kind of titles people had. My only title

was self-explanatory: Journalist. Other people on the lower rungs were tellers, receptionists, accountants. Perfectly straightforward. But titles like Manager Customer Satisfaction don't tell you what people actually do.

There's always a lot of furry terminology flying around in corporations, especially when it comes to things like "vision statements." You don't often see anything as vague as a vision statement. Probably because the language is being used to disguise the fact that a) there hasn't been a lot of thought put into what's really wanted; b) there are two (or more) different schools of thought on the subject, so ecumenical umbrella terms are needed to cover every alternative; or c) someone wants to sound impressive by using a lot of five-syllable words.

"I used to pounce on people's little accounts of 'a customer I once dealt with...' or 'the first time I ever did so-and-so' the way a miner might pounce on a tiny, shining gem. If you have to wander off on a tangent during the interview to score this stuff, then do it."

This last tendency is more widespread than you think. It's also associated with the fact that setting things down in concrete terms doesn't allow you much wriggle-room, if you want to start passing the buck later. If your job as a business communicator is to provide such escape routes, by all means start mastering the buzz-words. However, if you're trying to explain something to people who aren't in the know, it's best to call a spade a spade.

You're a prolific writer – have you ever suffered writer's block. If so, how would you recommend overcoming it?

There are two ways of making sure writers' block never even enters the picture – at least in my case. One way might be helpful to business communicators; the other probably doesn't have much relevance.

To make sure I don't suddenly find myself adrift in the middle of writing a book, I always start the whole process with a synopsis – the more detailed, the better. I've had synopses forty pages long (single spaced). My advice is that, no matter how much you want to leap in and start something, you shouldn't do it until you've drawn a plan. It's like building the frame of a house before you start laying the bricks, or drawing a map before you set out on a journey. The important thing is to ensure that you don't find yourself wandering down the wrong road, or standing at the edge of a cliff. Planning, planning, planning – that's my motto. Thanks to my synopses, I don't get writer's block. I thrash all that stuff out in my head before I set finger to keyboard, while I'm still in the plotting, note-taking stage.

My other way of combating writers' block is to use theme music. This is a technique that probably wouldn't be too useful to your average business communicator, but it goes like this: whenever I'm plotting a story, I find one or two pieces of music that sum it up for me – that give me a creative rush. Then, whenever I'm starting to flag, I listen to the music and it's like a strong cup of coffee. It gets me interested again. It renews my emotional engagement, while the synopsis does the technical job of pushing me along the right path.



YOUR BIGGEST PROBLEM, AND HOW TO GET ROUND IT

For many company employees, receiving yet another message in their busy, confused lives is a chore at best. And in any organisation there'll always be a more cynical group who are harder to engage than others.

But you can produce copy that will have a better chance of being read by following these steps.

PLAN

Plan what you're going to write and leave yourself enough time. Well-structured business writing is easy to read, yet, paradoxically, the hardest copy to write. List your main points (no more than four or five), then think about how you'll illustrate each. Think, too, of your audience and put yourself in their position. Like you, they're overloaded with information and hopelessly busy. What's useful and interesting for them to know? How much do they need to know?

USE SIMPLE LANGUAGE AND REFER TO PEOPLE

Use accessible language that talks about "we," "you" and "us." Don't say "persons," say "people." If you write "It has been brought to the attention of management that attendance and participation in the aforementioned program, hereinafter referred to as The Program, has increased substantially in all regions," there'll be a stampede for the tea trolley. That's if your readers haven't already nodded off. If you write, "Marketing Manager Jeff Brown says attendance is up," they'll get the idea. And they'll construct a mental image of that person, which will help them stay focused.

GET TO THE POINT IMMEDIATELY

"Sell" your message at once. Grab attention. Go straight to your main point as if you were writing a news report: "We'll be working more flexible hours from next year," General Manager Ken Jones said this morning. "All rosters and shifts in marketing and operations will be reviewed."

Other opening techniques can be effective. These include posing a question ("How would you like to get promoted?"), relating a brief story/anecdote ("When Darren Smith opened up his inbox last week, he was faced with a problem he'd never seen before ..."), or asking readers (very briefly) to think: ("Consider this: we're injuring three people every month and losing thousands of dollars to lost-time incidents.")

DON'T SAY TOO MUCH

Choose a few main points and list them in descending order of importance. Once you've finished your correspondence, carefully proofread it three times with the specific purpose of shortening it.

At the same time try to get rid of jargon and cliches. Say "now" instead of "at the present time," "because" instead of "due to the fact that," "consensus" instead of "consensus of opinion," "few" instead of "a limited number" and "although" instead of "despite the fact that." Avoid overworked phrases such as "in my honest opinion" and "as a matter of fact".

USEFUL RULES OF THUMB

Prefer the short word to the long
Prefer the familiar to the fancy. Instead of "All in all, it is with great pleasure that I can report that within the parameters of our balance sheet, our profitability has moved into exceedingly positive territory," say "margins are up."

Go for lower-case

Capitalising nouns unnecessarily slows up the read and can make a piece of communication seem like an excerpt from a railway timetable or legal tome. As in, "Our Staff were pleased to learn from The Managing Director that the Strategic Affairs Department together with the Melbourne Team had beaten the Marketing Department's 2003 Record by 50 points."

Tell them what you've told them

Wrap up your communication with a brief conclusion that summarises the main points. If someone asks your audience what your news is, they should be able to use that summary to tell them. "So we urgently need to boost sales this quarter. If we stick to the strategy I've outlined, we can do it."



LETTING IN THE SUNLIGHT

Kate Jennings is the author of the critically acclaimed novels *Snake* and *Moral Hazard*. The latter was based loosely on her experiences as a speech writer on Wall Street in the 1990s. Business jargon, she says, is an easy target for language scolds and usage police, but if corporations are serious about letting in the sunlight, they would do well to consider the official language of the executive suite and conference room.

My idea of hell: I'm in a windowless conference room in an anonymous skyscraper. It's lit like an operating theatre, the recycled air smells of industrial cleaning agents. It's eight in the morning – this is a day-long brainstorming meeting – so next to our pens and notepads, we have miniature doughnuts and tepid coffee in waxed paper cups.

Our team leader is warming up: “Our company has a distinctive value proposition for clients, shareholders and employees. Our fundamental principles and skill sets make us a distinctive and differentiated institution. That distinctive proposition is based on a total commitment to fairness and integrity.

These words are spoken to our bent heads because we are scribbling them onto our pads. After about ten minutes I feel the twinges of a migraine. After half an hour, my mind is a crater. Whatever “intellectual capital” I might have had has been bulldozed into non-existence by the practiced jargon that pours from the team leader's lips. No brain, no storm.

Squinting in the painful light, I wonder if business people have formed an unholy alliance with postmodernist literary theorists. The similarities in the tortured syntax and made-up words – verbs as nouns, nouns as verbs – can't be coincidence.

The team leader is hitting his stride: “We are at a watershed moment in our company's history,

an inflection point. If we incentivise the employees...” My colleagues dutifully write “watershed... inflection point...” So do I. It's how we stay awake. Eight hours to go.

“Every time someone in business uses jargon, take away one of their toys. ‘Value-added’, there goes the jet; ‘proactive’, the Porsche; ‘on the same page’, the speedboat; ‘win-win’, the house in Bali; ‘knowledge base’, the mistress.”

I know of what I speak. I wrote the team leader's words. I mean, they weren't a parody for this column. To come up with examples of business jargon, I took out a pile of papers from my days as a Wall Street speech writer and picked a page at random. That's what was on the page.

A modest proposal: Every time someone in business uses jargon, take away one of their toys. “Value-added”, there goes the jet; “proactive”, the Porsche; “on the same page”, the speedboat; “win-win”, the house in Bali; “knowledge base”, the mistress. Soon enough, business people would be saying what they mean, if not meaning what they say. To bring that about you'd have to threaten to ban them from the

Continued page 8

Continued from page 7

golf course for the term of their natural lives.

Business jargon is an easy target for language scolds and usage police, but if corporations are serious about letting in the sunlight as a result of Enron and other scandals, they would do well to consider the official language of the executive suite and conference room.

“George Orwell describes this process in his essay, *Politics and the English Language*. ‘When there is a gap between one’s real and declared aims,’ he wrote, ‘one turns instinctively to long words and exhausted idioms, like cuttlefish squirting out ink.’”

Note that I said “letting in the sunlight,” not “creating transparency.” Transparency is a worthwhile state, but corporations everywhere have adopted it as their watchword *du jour*, even while resisting regulation that would bring it about. Its meaning has been debased, co-opted. It has become part of the smoke that business blows up our collective arses.

George Orwell describes this process in his essay, *Politics and the English Language*. “When there is a gap between one’s real and declared aims,” he wrote, “one turns instinctively to long words and exhausted idioms, like cuttlefish squirting out ink.”

Paradoxically, we all *know* that business language is nothing but cuttlefish ink. We don’t expect corporate communications to be composed of anything but illogic, exaggeration, evasion and outright lies. But at the same time we allow ourselves to be seduced by its relentless optimism, its

aggressively positive outlook. We don’t want the truth.

You could argue that business people understand what is being said. They’re tuned into the subtext. It’s the language of the tribe. Tight-knit subgroups often use imaginative shorthand to describe their reality. Traders “catch falling knives,” hope for “traction,” and endure “downdrafts,” “yo-yo markets” and “dips” that put them “underwater.” Even executives come up with amusing usages; my current favourite is “best of breed”. The Enron chaps, marvellously, hilariously, thought themselves as “best of breed.”

Most of us, though, are put off by business gobbledegook. An example: an ad campaign with earnest young bankers informing us of their impeccable client focus. “I look, I look again,” intoned one and went on to talk about the “limbs” he went out on for clients, saying “bankers get more done than banks.” Email responses were invited. One read: “I looked, I looked again, puked. Who writes this embarrassing crap? It’s pretentious, vacuous, trite. Strong letter to follow.”

Back in hell, the team leader is winding down. “Let’s get granular. Let back in the final changes. Key is our plan to turbocharge brand awareness, thus building a potent strategic weapon and accelerating long-term value for our shareholders.”

A colleague from marketing, a major suck-up, manages to put “turbocharge” on his pad, although even his writing is growing enfeebled. The rest of us are beyond yawning or even whimpering.

“That’s it folks. We’ve had a productive day. An innovative day. Until next week.”

Yes. Right. Strong letter to follow.

Snake (Back Bay Books, 1999),
Moral Hazard (Pan Picador, 2002).



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