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TASTE

Writer's Little Helper

By DANIEL AKST

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Barry Bonds hit career home run No. 756 on Tuesday night, breaking Hank Aaron's storied record held since 1974.... Steroid allegations...have plagued the San Francisco Giants slugger. -- Associated Press, Aug. 8, 2007

Good morning, distinguished members of the Subcommittee. I'm pleased to be here before the Congress today so we can at last begin to restore the public's faith in literature.



Martin Kozlowski

I know that there's been a lot of speculation about what I'm going to say in my sworn testimony, some of it quite lurid, but unfortunately the reality is far worse than the imaginings of all the commentators and the reading public. And I am grateful to all of you for the grant of immunity that makes it so much easier for me to uphold my duty here.


Let me first make it clear that I intend to name names, which is why I'm testifying from beneath this hood, with the aid of a voice-distorting microphone. The literary game is vicious, ladies and gentlemen. A lot of money is at stake, and the words I speak could be worth my life. But those I've assisted in the past -- and I'm not proud of this -- joined me in corrupting a

business I've learned to love. Together we set a terrible example for youthful writers coming up through the MFA programs. There's no excuse for what I did, but there's no excuse for what my clients did either.

So yes, I am the person responsible for feats of writing productivity that, under normal circumstances, are simply beyond the power of mere mortals with 10 fingers and a literary imagination. I am the one who has made it possible -- thanks to the "performance enhancers" I sold and distributed so aggressively -- for America's top writers to push their page output to record levels, astonishing critics and book publishers and making it impossible for even avid fans to keep up with the deluge of print.

Is all this really such a surprise? Haven't you ever wondered how someone like Joyce Carol Oates churned out all those novels, stories, poems, plays -- even boxing essays? It's unnatural, and I should know. I watched as my "writer's little helpers" transformed a modestly productive academic into a

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terrifyingly prolific human writing machine.

That's how I met Joyce -- at the boxing ring, where for reasons I won't go into here I was well known in pugilistic circles. Joyce was so thankful the second time she was a Pulitzer Prize finalist that she introduced me to Anne Rice, Barbara Cartland, Stephen King, Tom Clancy, Danielle Steel and, eventually, J.K. Rowling. [*Pause while chairman gavels down crowd noise*] You're shocked? Ladies and gentlemen, let's all grow up. Wasn't anybody just a little bit taken aback that this obscure English writer suddenly, out of the blue, hits it out of the park on every single pitch? Not just seven straight best sellers, but seven straight averaging 700 pages! You should also know that the fantasies contained in those Harry Potter books are consistent with the kinds of hallucinations common to heavy users of the substances I peddle.

Through Steve King I met his fellow New Englander, John Updike. Johnny was always a gentleman; he even made a little pencil drawing of me that I keep framed right over my desk. Not only did I help Johnny jack up his literary output -- he's got a book of essays and reviews coming out that's 200,000 words if it's a paragraph -- but I also took half a dozen strokes off his golf game.

As you can see, writers often turned me on to one another. I'm especially popular with biographers, which is why chronicles of people's lives these days are as thick and heavy as cinder blocks. But just as often writers didn't want to share me and my magic with their peers. Fortunately for my business, I met writers on my own as well.

I encountered Philip Roth through some pals in Newark whose names I am not at liberty to disclose. I don't know if you have time to read much fiction, Madame Chairman, but scouts will tell you that most writers have done their best work by the time they turn 50. Phil was in a rut, he was getting old. I drove up to Vermont with my little black bag and provided a pick-me-up. In no time he was doing some of the best work of his life. Think of it -- a man in his 70s! He was so grateful; at one point -- forgive me, may I have just a moment? this is very emotional for me -- at one point, Phil had just finished "The Plot Against America" and wanted to dedicate it to me. "I'll just use your initials," he said. "Nobody will ever know." I couldn't let him of course, but I was touched.

The tragedy is that the publishing industry, the Guild, the New York Review of Books, all of them have turned a blind eye to the evidence right under their noses. The result is that young writers who would once have shattered their health the old-fashioned way -- with drink -- now risk it with performance enhancers. Our nation's literary output meanwhile is completely out of control, with new titles pouring out of the nation's presses faster than anyone can read them. Awards like the Pulitzer Prizes lose their value when we know the winner can't produce a clean blood test.

Ladies and gentlemen, the answer here is simple: a zero-tolerance policy based on rigorous, random testing. There's no other way. Imagine if the Guild could demand blood tests from any member at any time. Imagine if you couldn't get near Breadloaf or the University of Iowa without a complete lab work-up? Only then could we get on top of this tragic problem and know for sure that writers whose books win prizes earned them with a pen rather than a hypodermic needle.

Thank you very much for your time.

Mr. Akst writes from New York's Hudson Valley.

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