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THE SCIENCE OF THE SLEEPER

How the Information Age could blow away the blockbuster.

BY MALCOLM GLADWELL

IN 1992, a sometime actress named Rebecca Wells published a novel called "Little Altars Everywhere" with a small, now defunct press in Seattle. Wells was an unknown author, and the press had no money for publicity. She had a friend, however, who spent that Thanksgiving with a friend who was a producer of National Public Radio's "All Things Considered." The producer read the book and passed it on to Linda Wertheimer, a host of the show, and she liked it so much that she put Wells on her program. That interview, in turn, was heard by a man who was listening to the radio in Blytheville, Arkansas, and whose wife, Mary Gay Shipley, ran the town bookstore. He bought the book and gave it to her; she loved it, and, with that, the strange and improbable rise of Rebecca Wells, best-selling author, began.

Blytheville is a sleepy little town about an hour or so up the Mississippi from Memphis, and Mary Gay Shipley's bookstore—That Bookstore in Blytheville—sits between the Red Ball Barber Shop and Westbrook's shoe store on a meandering stretch of Main Street. The store is just one long room in a slightly shabby storefront, with creaky floors and big overhead fans and subject headings on the shelves marked with Post-it notes. Shipley's fiction section takes up about as much shelf space as a typical Barnes & Noble devotes to, say, homeopathic medicine. That's because Shipley thinks that a book buyer ought to be able to browse and read the jacket flap of everything that might catch her eye, without being overwhelmed by thousands of choices. Mostly, though, people come to Mary Gay Shipley's store in order to find out what Mary Gay thinks they ought to be reading, and in 1993 Mary Gay Shipley thought people ought to be reading "Little Altars Everywhere." She began ordering it by the dozen, which, Shipley says, "for us, is huge." She put it in the little rack

out front where she lists her current favorites. She wrote about it in the newsletter she sends to her regular customers. "We could tell it was going to have a lot of word of mouth," she says. "It was the kind of book where you could say, 'You'll love it. Take it home.'" The No. 1 author at That Bookstore in Blytheville in 1993 was John Grisham, as was the case in nearly every bookstore in the country. But No. 2 was Rebecca Wells.

"Little Altars Everywhere" was not a best-seller. But there were pockets of devotees around the country—in Blytheville; at the Garden District Book Shop, in New Orleans; at Parkplace books, in Kirkland, Washington—and those pockets created a buzz that eventually reached Diane Reverand, an editor in New York. Reverand published Wells's next book, "Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood," and when it hit the bookshelves the readers and booksellers of Blytheville, the Garden District, and Kirkland were ready. "When 'The Ya-Ya Sisterhood' came out, I met with an in-store sales rep from HarperCollins," Shipley said. She is a tall woman with graying hair and a quiet, dignified bearing. "I'm not real sure he knew what a hot book this was. When he came in the store, I just turned the page of the catalogue and said, 'I want one hundred copies,' and his jaw fell to the table, because I usually order four or two or one. And I said, 'I want her to come here! And if you go anywhere, tell people this woman sells in Blytheville!'"

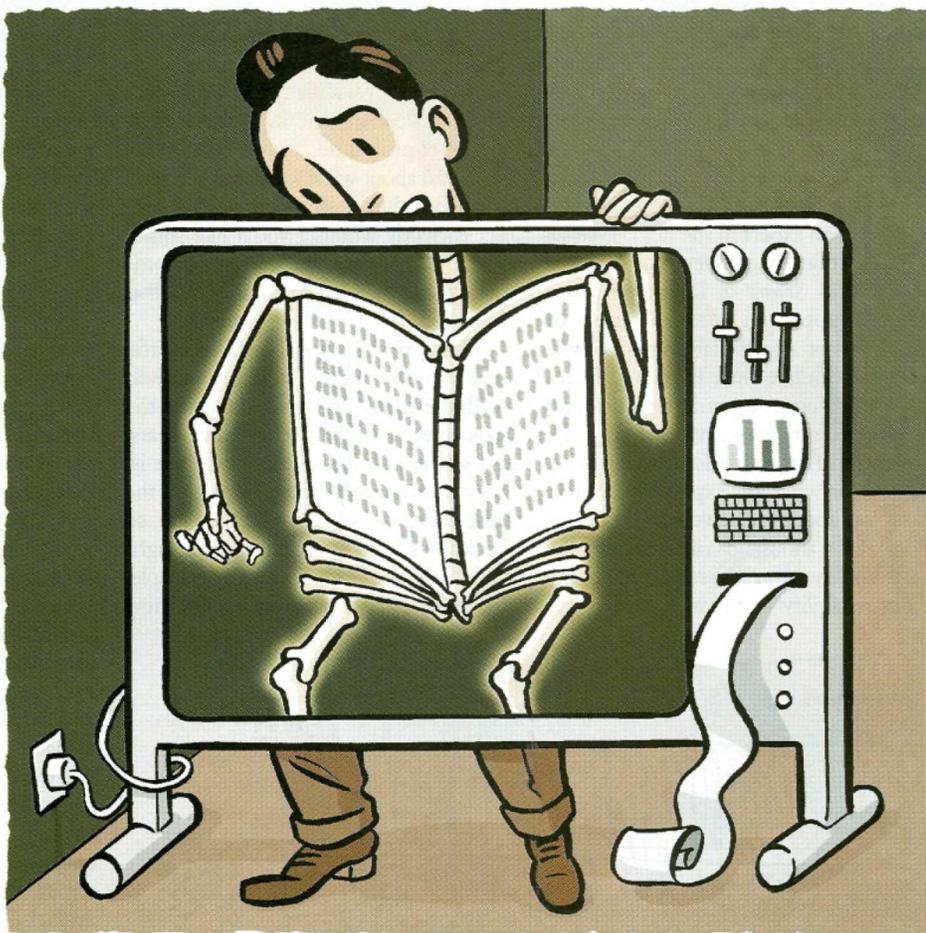
Wells made the trip to Arkansas and read in the back of Shipley's store; the house was packed, and the women in the front row wore placards saying "Ya-Ya." She toured the country, and the crowds grew steadily bigger. "Before the numbers really showed it, I'd be signing books and there would be groups of women who would come together, six or seven, and they would have me sign anywhere between three and ten books," Wells recalls. "And then, after that, I

started noticing mothers and daughters coming. Then I noticed that the crowds started to be three-generational—there would be teen-agers and sixth graders.” “Ya-Ya” sold fifteen thousand copies in hardcover. The paperback sold thirty thousand copies in its first two months. Diane Reverand took out a single-column ad next to the contents page of *The New Yorker*—the first dollar she’d spent on advertising for the paperback—and sales doubled to sixty thousand in a month. It sold and sold, and by February of 1998, almost two years after the book was published, it reached the best-seller lists. There are now nearly three million copies in print. Rebecca Wells, needless to say, has a warm spot in her heart for people like Mary Gay Shipley. “Mary Gay is a legend,” she says. “She just kept putting my books in people’s hands.”

IN the book business, as in the movie business, there are two kinds of hits: sleepers and blockbusters. John Grisham and Tom Clancy and Danielle Steel write blockbusters. Their books are announced with huge publicity campaigns. Within days of publication, they leap onto the best-seller lists. Sales start high—hundreds of thousands of copies in the first few weeks—and then taper off. People who buy or watch blockbusters have a clear sense of what they are going to get: a Danielle Steel novel is always—well, a Danielle Steel novel. Sleepers, on the other hand, are often unknown quantities. Sales start slowly and gradually build; publicity, at least early on, is often nonexistent. Sleepers come to your attention by a slow, serendipitous path: a friend who runs into a friend who sets up the interview that just happens to be heard by a guy married to a bookseller. Sleepers tend to emerge from the world of independent bookstores, because independent bookstores are the kinds of places where readers go to ask the question that

launches all sleeper hits: Can you recommend a book to me? Shipley was plugging Terry Kay’s “To Dance with the White Dog” long before it became a best-seller. She had Melinda Haynes lined up to do a reading at her store before Oprah tapped “Mother of Pearl” as one of her recommended books and it

number of Shipleys out there creating sleeper hits has declined as well. The big chain bookstores that have taken over the bookselling business are blockbuster factories, since the sheer number of titles they offer can make browsing an intimidating proposition. As David Gernert, who is John Grisham’s agent and editor,



Systems that use “collaborative filtering” try to predict what books you’ll like; the more information they have about your preferences, the more accurate, and idiosyncratic, their recommendations.

shot onto the best-seller lists. She read David Guterson’s “Snow Falling on Cedars” in manuscript and went crazy for it. “I called the publisher, and they said, ‘We think it’s a regional book.’ And I said, ‘Write it down. “M.G.S. says this is an important book.”’” All this makes it sound as if she has a sixth sense for books that will be successful, but that’s not quite right. People like Mary Gay Shipley don’t merely predict sleeper hits; they *create* sleeper hits.

Most of us, of course, don’t have someone like Mary Gay Shipley in our lives, and with the decline of the independent bookstore in recent years the

explains, “If you walk into a superstore, that’s where being a brand makes so much more of a difference. There is so much more choice it’s overwhelming. You see walls and walls of books. In that kind of environment, the reader is drawn to the known commodity. The brand-name author is now a safe haven.” Between 1986 and 1996, the share of book sales represented by the thirty top-selling hardcover books in America nearly doubled.

The new dominance of the blockbuster is part of a familiar pattern. The same thing has happened in the movie business, where a handful of heavily promoted films featuring “bankable” stars



B. Sandler

"Richard and I are planning on taking some time off just to enjoy our purchases."

don't work all that well at first, because, obviously, in order to find someone's cultural counterparts you need to know a lot more about them than how they felt about two movies. Even after I had given the system seven opinions (including "Election," 4; "Notting Hill," 2; "The Sting," 4; and "Star Wars," 1), it was making mistakes. It thought I would love "Titanic" and "Zero Effect," and I disliked them both. But after I had plugged in about fifteen opinions—which Riedl says is probably the minimum—I began to notice that the rating that MovieLens predicted I would give a movie and the rating I actually gave it were nearly always, almost eerily, the same. The system had found a small group of people who feel exactly the same way I do about a wide range of popular movies.

What makes this collaborative-filtering system different from those you may have encountered on Amazon.com or Barnesandnoble.com? In order to work well, collaborative filtering requires

a fairly representative sample of your interests or purchases. But most of us use retailers like Amazon only for a small percentage of our purchases. For example, I buy the fiction I read at the Barnes & Noble around the corner from where I live. I buy most of my nonfiction in secondhand bookstores, and I use Amazon for gifts and for occasional work-related books that I need immediately, often for a specific and temporary purpose. That's why, bizarrely, Amazon currently recommends that I buy a number of books by the radical theorist Richard Bandler, none of which I have any desire to read. But if I were to buy a much bigger share of my books on-line, or if I "educated" the filter—as Amazon allows every customer to do—and told it what I think of its recommendations, it's easy to see how, over time, it could turn out to be a powerful tool.

In a new book, "Net Worth," John Hagel, an E-commerce consultant with McKinsey & Company, and his co-author, Marc Singer, suggest that we

may soon see the rise of what they call "infomediaries," which are essentially brokers who will handle our preference information. Imagine, for example, that I had set up a company that collected and analyzed all your credit-card transactions. That information could be run through a collaborative filter, and the recommendations could be sold to retailers in exchange for discounts. Steve Larsen, the senior vice-president of marketing for Net Perceptions—a firm specializing in collaborative filtering which was started by Riedl and the former Microsoft executive Steven Snyder, among others—says that someday there might be a kiosk at your local video store where you could rate a dozen or so movies and have the computer generate recommendations for you from the movies the store has in stock. "Better yet, when I go there with my wife we put in my card and her card and say, 'Find us a movie we both like,'" he elaborates. "Or, even better yet, when we go with my fifteen-year-old daughter, 'Find us a movie all three of us like.'" Among marketers, the hope is that such computerized recommendations will increase demand. Right now, for example, thirty-five per cent of all people who enter a video store leave empty-handed, because they can't figure out what they want; the point of putting kiosks in those stores would be to lower that percentage. "It means that people might read more, or listen to music more, or watch videos more, because of the availability of an accurate and dependable and reliable method for them to learn about things that they might like," Snyder says.

One of Net Perceptions' clients is SkyMall, which is a company that gathers selections from dozens of mail-order catalogues—from Hammacher Schlemmer and L. L. Bean to the Wine Enthusiast—and advertises them in the magazines that you see in the seat pockets of airplanes. SkyMall licensed the system both for their Web site and for their 800-number call center, where the software looks for your doppelgänger while you are calling in with your order, and a few additional recommendations pop up on the operator's screen. SkyMall's system is still in its infancy, but, in a test, the company found that it has increased the total sales per customer somewhere between fifteen and twenty-five per cent. What's remarkable about the SkyMall system is that it links prod-

ucts from many different categories. It's one thing, after all, to surmise that if someone likes "The Remains of the Day" he is also going to like "A Room with a View." But it's quite another to infer that if you liked a particular item from the Orvis catalogue there's a certain item from Reliable Home Office that you'll also be interested in. "Their experience has been absolutely hilarious," Larsen says. "One of the very first recommendations that came out of the engine was for a gentleman who was ordering a blue cloth shirt, a twenty-eight-dollar shirt. Our engine recommended a hundred-and-thirty-five-dollar cigar humidor—and he bought it! I don't think anybody put those two together before."

The really transformative potential of collaborative filtering, however, has to do with the way taste products—books, plays, movies, and the rest—can be marketed. Marketers now play an elaborate game of stereotyping. They create fixed sets of groups—middle-class-suburban, young-urban-professional, inner-city-working-class, rural-religious, and so on—and then find out enough about us to fit us into one of those groups. The collaborative-filtering process, on the other hand, starts with who we are, then derives our cultural "neighborhood" from those facts. And these groups aren't permanent. They change as we change. I have never seen a film by Luis Buñuel, and I have no plans to. I don't put myself in the group of people who like Buñuel. But if I were to see "That Obscure Object of Desire" tomorrow and love it, and enter my preference on MovieLens, the group of people they defined as "just like me" would immediately and subtly change.

A group at Berkeley headed by the computer scientist Ken Goldberg has, for instance, developed a collaborative-filtering system for jokes. If you log on to the site, known as Jester, you are given ten jokes to rate. (Q: Did you hear about the dyslexic devil worshipper? A.: He sold his soul to Santa.) These jokes aren't meant to be especially funny; they're jokes that reliably differentiate one "sense of humor" from another. On the basis of the humor neighborhood you fall into, Jester gives you additional jokes that it thinks you'll like. Goldberg has found that when he analyzes the data from the site—and thirty-six thou-

sand people so far have visited Jester—the resulting neighborhoods are strikingly amorphous. In other words, you don't find those thirty-six thousand people congregating into seven or eight basic humor groups—off-color, say, or juvenile, or literary. “What we'd like to see is nice little clusters,” Goldberg says. “But, when you look at the results, what you see is something like a cloud with sort of bunches, and nothing that is nicely defined. It's kind of like looking into the night sky. It's very hard to identify the constellations.” The better you understand someone's particular taste pattern—the deeper you probe into what he finds interesting or funny—the less predictable and orderly his preferences become.

Collaborative filtering underscores a lesson that, for the better part of history, humans have been stubbornly resistant to learning: if you want to understand what one person thinks or feels or likes or does it isn't enough to draw inferences from the general social or demographic category to which he belongs. You cannot tell, with any reasonable degree of certainty, whether someone will like “The Girl's Guide to Hunting and Fishing” by knowing that the person is a single twenty-eight-year-old woman who lives in Manhattan, any more than you can tell whether somebody will commit a crime knowing only that he's a twenty-eight-year-old African-American male who lives in the Bronx. Riedl has taken demographic data from the people who log on to MovieLens—such as their age and occupation and sex—but he has found that it hardly makes his predictions any more accurate. “What you tell us about what you like is far more predictive of what you will like in the future than anything else we've tried,” he says. “It seems almost dumb to say it, but you tell that to marketers sometimes and they look at you puzzled.”

None of this means that standard demographic data is useless. If you were trying to figure out how to market a coming-of-age movie, you'd be most interested in collaborative-filtering data from people below, say, the age of twenty-eight. Facts such as age and sex and place of residence are useful in sorting the kinds of information you get from a recommendation engine. But the cen-

tral claim of the collaborative-filtering movement is that, head to head, the old demographic and “psychographic” data cannot compete with preference data. This is a potentially revolutionary argument. Traditionally, there has been almost no limit to the amount of information marketers have wanted about their customers: academic records, work experience, marital status, age, sex, race, Zip Code, credit records, focus-group sessions—everything has been relevant, because in trying to answer the question of what we want marketers have taken the long way around and tried to find out first who we are. Collaborative filtering shows that, in predicting consumer preferences, none of this information is all that important. In order to know what someone wants, what you really need to know is what they've wanted.



HOW will this affect the so-called blockbuster complex? When a bookstore's sales are heavily driven by the recommendations of a particular person—a Mary Gay Shipley—sleepers, relatively speaking, do better and blockbusters do worse. If you were going to read only Clancy and Grisham and Steel, after all, why would you need to ask Shipley what to read? This is what David Gernert, Grisham's agent, meant when he said that in a Barnes & Noble superstore a brand like Grisham enjoys a “safe haven.” It's a book you read when there is no one, like Shipley, with the credibility to tell you what else you ought to read. Gernert says that at this point in Grisham's career each of his novels follows the same general sales pattern. It rides high on the best-seller lists for the first few months, of course, but, after that, “his sales pick up at very specific times—notably, Father's Day and Mother's Day, and then it will sell well again for Christmas.” That description makes it clear that Grisham's books are frequently bought as gifts. And that's because gifts are the trickiest of all purchases. They require a guess about what somebody else likes, and in conditions of uncertainty the logical decision is to buy the blockbuster, the known quantity.

Collaborative filtering is, in effect, anti-blockbuster. The more information the system has about you, the more nar-

row and exclusive its recommendations become. It's just like Shipley: it uses its knowledge about you to steer you toward choices you wouldn't normally know about. I gave MovieLens my opinions on fifteen very mainstream American movies. I'm a timid and unsophisticated moviegoer. I rarely see anything but very commercial Hollywood releases. It told me, in return, that I would love "C'est Arrivé Près de Chez Vous," an obscure 1992 Belgian comedy, and "Shall We Dance," the 1937 Fred and Ginger vehicle. In other words, among my moviegoing soul mates are a number of people who share my views on mainstream fare but who also have much greater familiarity with foreign and classic films. The system essentially put me in touch with people who share my tastes but who happen to know a good deal more about movies. Collaborative filtering gives voice to the expert in every preference neighborhood. A world where such customized recommendations were available would allow Shipley's well-read opinions to be known not just in Blytheville but wherever there are people who share her taste in books.

Collaborative filtering, in short, has the ability to reshape the book market. When customized recommendations are available, choices become more heterogeneous. Big bookstores lose their blockbuster bias, because customers now have a way of narrowing down their choices to the point where browsing becomes easy again. Of the top hundred best-selling books of the nineteen-nineties, there are only a handful that can accurately be termed sleepers—Robert James Waller's "The Bridges of Madison County," James Redfield's "The Celestine Prophecy," John Berendt's "Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil," Charles Frazier's "Cold Mountain." Just six authors—John Grisham, Tom Clancy, Stephen King, Michael Crichton, Dean Koontz, and Danielle Steel—account for sixty-three of the books on the list. In a world more dependent on collaborative filtering, Grisham, Clancy, King, and Steel would still sell a lot of books. But you'd expect to see many more books like "Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood"—many more new writers—make their way onto the best-seller list. And the gap between the very best selling books and those in the middle would narrow. Collaborative filter-

ing, Hagel says, "favors the smaller, the more talented, more quality products that may have a hard time getting visibility because they are not particularly good at marketing."

IN recent years, That Bookstore in Blytheville has become a mecca for fiction in the South. Prominent writers drop by all the time to give readings in the back, by the potbellied stove. John Grisham himself has been there nine times, beginning with his tour for "The Firm," which was the hit that turned him into a blockbuster author. Melinda Haynes, Bobbie Ann Mason, Roy Blount, Jr., Mary Higgins Clark, Billie Letts, Sandra Brown, Jill Conner Browne, and countless others have recently made the drive up from Memphis. Sometimes Shipley will host a supper for them after the reading, and send the proceeds from the event to a local literacy program.

There seems, in this era of mega-stores, something almost impossibly quaint about That Bookstore in Blytheville. The truth is, though, that the kind of personalized recommendation offered by Mary Gay Shipley represents the future of marketing, not its past. The phenomenal success in recent years of Oprah Winfrey's book club—which created one best-seller after another on the strength of its nominations—suggests that, in this age of virtually infinite choice, readers are starved for real advice, desperate for a recommendation from someone they know and who they feel knows them. "Certain people don't want to waste their time experimenting with new books, and the function we provide here is a filter," Shipley says, and as she speaks you can almost hear the makings of another sleeper on the horizon. "If we like something, we get behind it. I'm reading a book right now called 'Nissa's Place,' by Alexandria LaFaye. She's a woman I think we're going to be hearing more from." ♦

THERE'LL ALWAYS BE AN ENGLAND

[From the *Irish Times*]

Some inmates at Britain's first privately-run jail have asked to be moved—because staff are too friendly, according to a report out yesterday. The culture shock for some prisoners transferred to the relaxed and spotless Wolds jail at Brough in Humberside had proved so unsettling they asked to be sent back to jails characterised by more familiar "mutual antipathy" between staff and inmates.