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The new insta-book: Blog comments

By JENNA WORTHAM *The New York Times*

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After Duncan Birmingham, a comedy screenwriter in Los Angeles, got one too many holiday cards featuring miserable-looking pets wearing fake reindeer antlers, he realized the photos were great material for a blog.

Birmingham started *Pets Who Want to Kill Themselves* in early January, uploaded the first entry and asked readers to contribute. Within days, visitors were supplying him with snapshots of bulldogs in bunny costumes and cats wearing wigs.

The blogosphere noticed -- and so did the publishing world. Within a week, he was contacted by editors and literary agents. By the second month, he said, he had sold a book based on the photos to Three Rivers Press, an imprint at Crown Publishing Group, for "enough money to buy a Lincoln Town Car" -- with change left over.

Not bad for an unpublished novelist who is allergic to animals and admits that he is "terrible with computers."



Duncan Birmingham was inundated with photos like this one when he started a blog. *NEW YORK TIMES / PETS WHO WANT TO KILL THEMSELVES*

Of course, it is not unusual for blogs to form the basis of books. For example, Christian Lander, author of the humor blog *Stuff White People Like*, wrote scores of blog entries and then reworked them into a popular book of the same name in 2008.

But the latest frenzy is over books that take the lazy, Tom Sawyer approach to authorship. The creators come up with a goofy or witty idea, put it up on a simple platform like Twitter or Tumblr, and wait for contributors to provide all of the content. The authors put their energy into publicizing the sites and compiling the best material.

Agents and publishing houses cannot get seem to get enough of these quickie humor books, which sell for \$10 to \$15 in gift shops and hip clothing stores like Urban Outfitters as well as traditional bookstores. At least eight books created from user-generated content are due out this year, including "Love, Mom," a just-published collection of embarrassing or funny electronic exchanges between mothers and their children.

"Just about every house in town is paying attention," said Patrick Mulligan, a senior editor at Gotham Books who handled a 2008 book of cat photos with bizarre captions called "I Can Has Cheezburger?"

Publishers are hoping that millions of page views on a blog will translate into booming sales on the bookstand, he said. "I Can Has Cheezburger," based on a blog of the same name, sold more than 100,000 copies and hovered on The New York Times best-seller list for 13 weeks.

"As long as the category is selling books, publishers aren't going to ignore it," said Mulligan, who recently purchased two more books from the company behind the "Cheezburger" phenomenon.

Ben Huh, who bought the "Cheezburger" franchise from its original owners, hopes to create a whole line of similar books.

"We're turning user-generated content into editorial content," said Huh, who estimates that his company will generate half a million dollars in revenue from its book deals alone.

The audience for these blogs and books is drawn to the gross as much as to the cute. The photoblog "This is Why You're Fat," a repository of grotesque

food creations like bacon-wrapped Twinkies, attracted more than 2 million page views in its first few days of operation and was a popular topic on social networks like Digg, Twitter and Facebook. The viral popularity of the site propelled the blog's creators onto the radar of the publishing industry.

"From the first day, we were getting calls from agents," said Jessica Amason, one of the founders. In March, three weeks after the blog's introduction, Amason and the co-creator Richard Blakeley landed a six-figure book deal with HarperStudio, an imprint of HarperCollins.

Web-oriented literary agents like Kate McKean have seen the competition to sign new clients increase in the last few months.

"There are a lot more agents chasing down hot properties," she said. McKean, whose clients include Huh, gravitates toward sites with measurable, consistent traffic. "You can use that information to prove marketability," she said.

Still, there are risks for both authors and publishers.

Tracking down the owners of user-submitted materials to obtain publishing rights can be daunting, said Doree Shafrir, one of the creators behind "Love, Mom," which was built from a blog called Postcards From Yo Momma that collected humorous e-mail and instant-message conversations between women and their adult children.

When Shafrir and Jessica Grose, the co-creator, signed a contract with Hyperion to publish a collection of their tales, Hyperion told them they had to secure permissions from both the contributors and their mothers.

"We were freaking out for a few days because if we hadn't gotten the forms back, we wouldn't have gotten the book. That was a little scary," Shafrir said.

And then there is the risk that the Internet crowd will get bored and move on before the book comes out.

"You want to catch the wave while it's cresting," Mulligan said.

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