



HISTORY PLOYS
The played-out cultural history may be nearing the end of its shelf life.

Cod Help Us

It's time for publishing's most noxious trend to become history. BY PETER HYMAN

This month, Alfred A. Knopf will print 35,000 copies of a 464-page hardcover narrative devoted to a "technological and cultural artifact" whose "use and significance [is] determined by its producers and consumers." The subject of this landmark work: the toothpick. Were the beveled birch sticks not wasting enough trees on their own?

Of course, Knopf isn't alone in its dual-fronted assault on forests and common sense. This fall, tomes dedicated to subjects like allergies, insomnia, cleanliness, the evolution of the forward pass in pro football, and the "Heil Hitler" salute will flood the market. They join earlier explorations of the penis, magic mushrooms, facial hair, hillbillies, masturbation, consumer credit, flatulence, tears, plastic, male impotence, and thousands of other heretofore unexplored topics that have been plumbed for what's become the book world's most overworked genre: the cultural history.

Nothing against them *in theory*. The idea that every phenomenon—from waffles to the War of 1812—has a valid and traceable historical arc is appealingly democratic, and some (Michel Pastoureau's *Blue*, Dava Sobel's *Longitude*) have been good and enlightening reads. Cod may not be the sexiest fish, but Mark Kurlansky's 1998 best-seller of the same name was an engrossing examination of how Europeans' insatiable appetite for the stuffed them to explore the world.

Unfortunately, the lit-world fad represented by *Cod* (and the author's other fine cultural histories, *Salt* and *The Big Oyster*), has long since jumped the shark. No matter

how you try to build up *Devil's Rope: A Cultural History of Barbed Wire* ("Barbed wire's simplicity of concept and ease of realization belies the critical role it has played in the modern ..." Zzzzz), it's still a pretty flimsy narrative strand. Yet publishers have slavishly greenlighted every over-thought tome that comes across the transom in hopes of landing the Next Little Thing. Jonathan Galassi, president of Farrar, Straus & Giroux, acknowledges that the trend is out of hand. "My predecessor here used to refer to some of these projects as 'ooks, in that they weren't quite books and didn't have the heft of a real work."

And it's getting worse. If an author were to write a cultural history of cultural histories, he might trace their modern origins to French philosophers like Michel Foucault. In Foucault's heyday, the field was wide open, so historians could explore big subjects that actually mattered. Now, as more and more topics have been earmarked for authoritative histories, writers have been forced into increasingly inconsequential realms. Where Foucault wrote about insanity, we have jeans, snowboarding, and 'shrooms; where he wrote about sexuality, we have impotence.

But the backlash may have begun. To date, Alan Krell's history of barbed wire has sold just 100 copies. And not surprisingly, some publishers seem to be tiring of the genre. "To be honest," says Jonathan Brent, editorial director of Yale University Press, "I think most cultural histories are bogus." Then again, as his fall catalog includes works on the human heart, hotels, bears, and "the American burger," perhaps his criticism should be taken with a grain of *Salt*.

**on the
radar**

**EXIT
GHOST**
PHILIP
ROTH

Exit Ghost

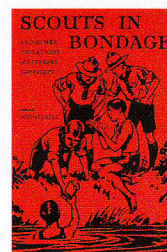
BY PHILIP ROTH
(Houghton Mifflin)

Roth's decision to bring back his beloved alter ego for one last score seems dicey. But he delivers with a bizarre tale about Nathan Zuckerman's return to Gotham after 11 years in the boondocks.

The Braindead Megaphone

BY GEORGE SAUNDERS
(Riverhead)

America's sultan of satire tackles nonfiction in his first collection of essays. Tongue in cheek and heart on sleeve, he weaves stunning narratives around marauding immigration agents, a teenage Buddha, and the mind of a dog.



Scouts in Bondage

EDITED BY MICHAEL BELL
(Simon & Schuster)

One shouldn't judge a book by its cover, but this collection of ill-considered dust jackets gets comedic mileage out of just that. With titles ranging from *How Nell Scored* to the provocative *Muffs and Morals*, the laughs are cheap, but satisfying.