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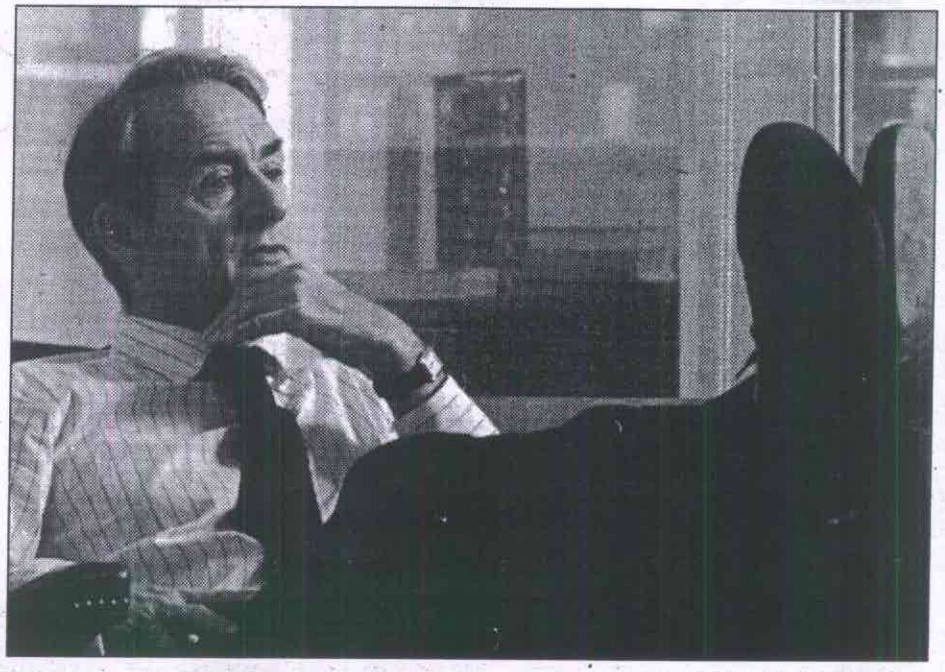
The House That Harry

RANDOM HOUSE PUBLISHER Harold M. Evans twisted his arms and legs into a pretzel shape. "I'm a Japanese wrestler who's suddenly wrestling with himself," he explained with the satisfaction of one who should have such a problem.

A whopping eight of his books have settled on The New York Times' national best-seller list and two newer titles may get there as well — to be further propelled by the price discounting that the big retailers routinely give to best sellers.

"Brando: Songs My Mother Taught Me," a $5-million acquisition arranged by Evans himself, jumped on the list after its release on Sept. 7 (though Marlon Brando's autobiography now appears to be slipping off). Two memoirs of the 1992 presidential campaign, James Carville and Mary Matalin's "All's Fair" and Hunter S. Thompson's "Better Than Sex," also have landed there, along with two new novels, John Irving's "A Son of the Circus" and Anna Quindlen's "One True Thing."



Barbara Hansen Photographics, 1992

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Paul D. Colford

James Michener's "Recessional" and Richard Preston's "The Hot Zone" are in the wings. Of the latter book, the true story of a hunt for a killer virus, Evans said: "I will eat a paperback book if that's not on the best-seller list this week or next week."

It may be that Random House's wealth of popular choices will conspire to keep one or more of them from achieving maximum sales — or, as Evans fears, block less star-driven titles from reaching best-seller status. "There's no doubt about it that we are fighting with ourselves to some degree," he said. In the meantime, however, there's no doubt about it that the best-seller tally alone will make this a strong year for the publishing house.

"It's all coming together," a competitor conceded. "There's a lot of excitement there."

The 67-year-old Evans, a former British newspaperman who is married to New Yorker editor Tina Brown, was an editor at Atlantic Monthly Press, U. S. News & World Report and Condé Nast Traveler before being named president of the Random House Trade Publishing Group, including Villard Books and Times Books, in 1990. Early in his tenure, he promised to open up Random House's list of offerings to make it "genuinely 'random.' "

The current array, which also includes a first novel (Laura Joh Rowland's "Shinju") and a $45 photographic history ("The Russian Century"), appears to fulfill that promise even though Evans says he relied on those seasoned editors under him to deliver it. (It was editor Ann Godoff, for example, who acquired three of Random House's recent hits — Nathan McCall's "Makes Me Wanna Holler," Caleb Carr's "The Alienist" and John Berendt's "Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil," a no-longer-sleeper of a murder mystery that has spent 30 weeks — and counting — on the best-seller list.)

At the same time, what makes Evans a welcome presence in the frequently tight-lipped world of New York book publishing is his willingness to speak candidly about the pitfalls and finances of the industry. At a seminar last winter, he helped dispel the popular notion that a best seller is by definition a profitable book when he bared some of Random House's own profit-and-loss realities.

According to Evans, the 29 Random House titles that made the

Built

Random House publisher Harold Evans: eight titles on The New York Times national best-seller list and two apparently on the way

Times' end-of-1993 list of "notable books" collectively lost around $600,000. In addition, a smaller group of nonfiction titles honored in 1993 by the American Library Association, including David Remnick's "Lenin's Tomb" and Paul Kennedy's "Preparing for the 21st Century," together lost about $360,000.

Coming from the privately held company — Random House is part of the Newhouse family's media empire — this was a tantalizing admission. What's more, Evans went on to explain, two books essentially floated all boats by netting $1.4 million between them. He did not identify the pair, but presumably he was referring to Maya Angelou's popular "Wouldn't Take Nothing for My Journey Now" and Marianne Williamson's "A Woman's Worth."

"Two books were so profitable that they paid for the rest," he repeated in his office this week.

"There's a lot of luck in it," he added, citing the example of Gerald Posner's "Case Closed," which argued that Lee Harvey Oswald alone killed President John F. Kennedy — and became an unexpectedly strong seller.

"We would have done it ['Case Closed'] even if we'd have lost money," Evans said. "No, let me rephrase that: We don't sign up a book deliberately saying, 'Tee-hee-hee, we're going to lose a lot of money on this.' You always live in hope and try to be realistic and try to take a long view, too." That is, some books, such as "Case Closed," may sell for years after their initial release.

Indeed, Brando writes that Evans presented a long view when the publisher wooed him to write the autobiography. According to the actor, Evans argued that potential profits from the showbizzy memoir would enable Random House "to publish books by talented unpublished authors that might not make money. In his own way, Harry is a hooker just like me, looking for a way to make money any way he can."

Seated in his corner office, a suspendered gentleman with afternoon tea in hand, Evans was asked about Brando's blunt recollection.

"It's something I might say," Evans stated. "Brando's a very provocative man. He will ask you questions about the nature of the universe, or marital relationships, or the ethics of the press. So you're off on an intellectual wild goose chase. In the course of that, I think he might have asked how you run a publishing

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house, and I think I may have told him: 'Your book may make so much money that we can sustain ten slim volumes of poetry.' "

With the financial return on "Brando" still in question — an earlier Big Book, "Magic Johnson: My Life," faded on Random House after a highly visible launch in 1992 — Evans faces an even richer gamble. The autobiography of retired general Colin Powell, for which Evans reportedly is paying *$6 million*, has been scheduled for publication next fall.

"We've taken a large leap in the dark, as you know," said Evans, who plans to edit this one himself. Then again, the pundits have been buzzing that Powell is presidential material.

Will Powell run? "He's not telling me, but I wouldn't be surprised," Evans said.

In addition, there may be news-making color in what Powell has to say about his recent peace-making foray to Haiti with former President Jimmy Carter. "He told me the most astonishing stuff about Haiti," Evans said. "We're very, very lucky."

He added: "This year will be the best ever — and I live in certain terror in 1995." ■