

## Soapbox

*Was this a glimpse into my own future—magnifying glasses, walkers, home defibrillators?*

### Enough with the Fine Print

Big fonts are not just for geezers

BY ROBERT MASELLO

Like most secret love affairs, it began innocently.

I went to my local library and asked for a copy of Charles Baxter's new novel, *Saul and Patsy*.

"The regular edition's checked out," the librarian said, scanning her computer screen, "but the large print edition isn't."

She nodded toward the Large Print section, a few shelves all the way in back, where an elderly patron was slumped in an armchair, her aluminum walker parked at her elbow.

"Oh no, that's okay," I said, but the librarian was already escorting me over, kneeling down by the shelves lined with titles on arthritis management, Alzheimer's care, Parkinson's disease. She popped up with *Saul and Patsy*, plunked it into my hand. I was too embarrassed, as I reached over the walker, to say no.

I walked home, squirreling it away under my arm the way I used to carry copies of *Playboy* in high school. Opening it, I encountered an earnest but dispiriting note from the National Association for the Visually Handicapped. This was a good thing, I knew, a noble thing. So why did it make me feel the way I had when my doctor started fretting over my cholesterol?

And was this, I wondered, as I thumbed through the pages—many pages—of large,

bold, black type, a glimpse into my own near future—magnifying glasses, walkers, home defibrillators? Had anyone *died*, I thought, with this very book in hand?

But I really did want to read this book, and once I got into bed with it that night, I discovered something. I could take off my bifocals and read it just fine; in fact, I could balance the book on the ample swell of my belly and turn the pages with quick precision. Very quick, as it turns out. Large Print books, I learned, make you feel like a speed reader.

And so began my clandestine love affair. When I brought the book back, I made a long, slow journey through the regular stacks (to throw off any witnesses), then crouched down by the Large Print shelves, where I discovered, with some looking, that there were lots of other literary titles, too—books by Philip Roth and Toni Morrison, Ian McEwan and Jonathan Lethem, Monica Ali and Amy Tan and Tracy Chevalier. And they were all mine. Nobody else seemed to know they were here. The other poor suckers were putting their names on waiting lists for the regular editions.

I felt like I'd stumbled across an unstaked gold mine.

Having discovered the advantages of Large Print books, I started looking for them, surreptitiously, in bookstores. I was stymied at almost every turn. At my big local Barnes & Noble I found the Large Print section—all five sparsely populated shelves of it—on the third floor, way in back, right under the Weddings section. There's synergy for you.

I felt dismissed—and then I felt miffed. Listen, I'm 53—though in the right light, on a good hair day, I'm told I can pass for 52—and I can't believe I'm the only one who would relish a bolder display and a greater range of commercially oriented titles. But I

need a little help here.

Booksellers—don't make me look so hard, for so little.

And publishers—put more of these books in print. According to Bowker's Books in Print database, the top dozen or so trade houses put out roughly 25,000 new titles last year, and only about 10% of them found their way into large print.

Finally, somebody's got to come up with a campaign that will make me feel less like a geezer or a glaucoma victim, and more like a guy simply making a cool lifestyle choice. Geez, if they can come up with sexy slogans for erectile dysfunction, how hard can it be? How about "My Font Is Bigger than Yours!" or "Bet You Can't Lift This Book!" Or, should all else fail: "If reading lasts for more than four hours, consult your nearest publishing professional." ■

*Robert Masello is the author, most recently, of Robert's Rules of Writing (Writer's Digest Books) and Vigil (Berkeley).*

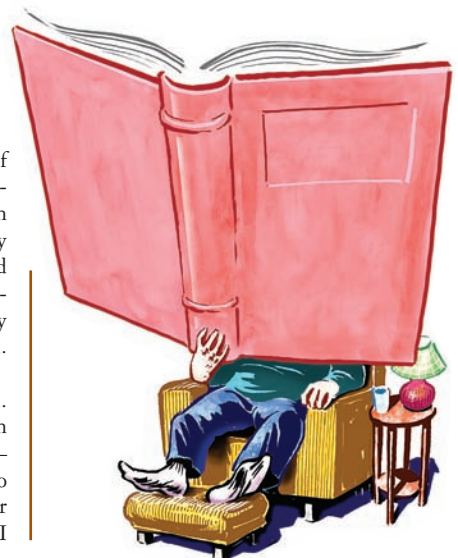


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