Los Angeles Times | ARTICLE COLLECTIONS

← Back to Original Article

Computer May Put Novelist in the Chips : Author Uses His Modem to Promote High-Tech Detective Story

January 08, 1986 | BEVERLY BEYETTE | Times Staff Writer

\07 Southern California was settling in for a blistering day and by 9 a.m. the tiny waiting room in the parole office was a sauna. David Cursore, in keeping with the stipulations of the court, arrived for his weekly review and took a seat on a splintered oak chair. After a moment he noticed a mouse peering at him, eyeing the remains of an apple core from behind a wad of paper. Using his toe, Cursore nudged what was left of the fruit toward the creature. The rodent twitched gray whiskers and nibbled at the offering, then suddenly scampered away as heavy footsteps approached....

So, rather tamely, begins the wild adventure of a felon on parole who finds himself on the trail of a psychotic killer terrorizing residents of a high-rise in Marina del Rey. The book is "Safety Catch," a paperback novel by Los Angeles writer Jaron Summers.

His protagonist, David Cursore, has been convicted of a white-collar computer crime, a little matter of illegally transferring someone else's money to his own bank account.

In a nice twist of plot, Cursore is exonerated (he was framed), struggles out of his hospital bed (he was shot), taps into a computer system and. . . .

Now, Summers wants people to buy his high-tech detective story. And he is, at 42, world-wise enough to know that a paperback novel by a novelist who is not a household name, published by a small house (Leisure Books division of Dorchester Publishing in New York) and without a massive publicity blitz isn't going to knock Sidney Sheldon off the rack at the neighborhood 7-Eleven.

Lots of Competition

"Safety Catch" came out Dec. 1, and, Summers figured, "I had about two months to get some kind of attention for it" before it disappeared from the racks and headed for the shredder. He knew the reality: "Each month about 450 of these books hit the stands. The average book rack has maybe 125 pockets, so your chances are maybe one in three of getting the thing displayed. And if I owned a store, I'd put up three or four Stephen Kings."

His challenge: "How do you get someone to paw through the bottom book rack for an unknown novel?" Two weeks after its publication, Summers observed glumly, "The general public hadn't heard a thing about my novel."

Inspiration struck. More accurately, Summers said, it was desperation that struck. Now, he had written a novel on his Epson QX-10 about crime-solving by computer. Bingo! What if he offered the first chapter, free, via electronic bulletin board to the millions of home computer owners coast to coast?

And what if he offered $5 to any computer freak willing to post that chapter on another of the thousands of free boards that are accessible to anyone with a home computer and a modem, a device that translates computer text into impulses that go out over telephone lines?

And what if, in addition, he offered the chapter to the combined 300,000 subscribers of two of the major commercial data and communications companies, Ohio-based CompuServe and Virginia-based The Source?

The first thing Summers did, using his new software, was to subscribe to both of the above, at $40 each. Next, he punched in Chapter 1 with a little note of explanation and his offer of the reward money.

"Terribly clever," said Jane Thornton, editorial director for Dorchester, even while admitting that, when it comes to computerese, "you've lost me. I'm still creeping into the 20th Century (having only recently converted to an electronic typewriter)."

But is it selling books? "It's very hard to tell," Thornton said, as it usually takes two months to get any feedback on a novel. But, after a first printing of 100,000, Leisure Books has reprinted "Safety Catch" in anticipation.

In the office of his Bel-Air condo, Summers flipped the switch of his computer, called a local telephone number that connected him to The Source, typed his password and asked for his mail. Nothing as yet today. On The Source's public bulletin board, under Books and Publications, he called up his entry: "Read Chapter 1 below and then find out how to make money by posting information. . . . "

"Every morning I've been getting from two or three to 15 messages," Summers said. "I've linked hundreds, thousands of these bulletin boards together. I've gotten messages from all over the United States. Some just say, 'Hello and good luck.' "

He has written 50 checks to computer buffs who have put Chapter 1 of "Safety Catch" on another electronic bulletin board, out of his own pocket but with prospects of his publisher picking up half that tab. (He has set himself a pay-out limit of $2,000). And, he said, "A number of people have said they don't want the money, they were just having fun."

His rule is, no more than $50 in payment at $5 a posting to any one person or household. "I want to network," Summers said. "This is the first time, I guess, that anyone has really tied it together," this string of electronic bulletin boards created by users with their own software. "These (computer) people are just like the old ham radio operators. Some of them spent $50,000 on equipment."

Summers estimates that Chapter 1 is on more than 400 bulletin boards and, within two weeks, "will have reached a saturation point" of several thousand boards, each of which has more than 1,000 users.

Summers, a Canadian by birth and an Angeleno for 15 years, has tapped into Canadian bulletin boards but has not gone into other countries. But someone else has because he "got a call from a guy in England who had read it." The caller couldn't buy the book there, so Summers sent him a copy.

This thing is "like a huge pyramid," Summers said, a gigantic electronic chain letter.

To date, Summers estimates his expenses at $1,055: $175 for the modem, $80 to join the two commercial networks, $50 for copying and mailing and $750 paid to 50 computer-users for posting Chapter 1, the average check being $15.

There was no cost to him to enter his text on the networks, as a subscriber is permitted the equivalent of 20 or 30 pages free. (The companies make their money on use of their telephone lines at a maximum charge of more than 40 cents a minute in prime time, U.S. With the free boards, the cost can be as little as $1.20 an hour.

(Some local free board numbers for calling up Chapter 1: (213) 806-2226, (213) 598-8495, (818) 341-3342, (818) 956-6164.)

On a free board, a user would typically enter "BBS" for bulletin board system and "S" for scan, which would lead him to an entry about Summers' new novel. Hitting "R" for read, the user would find a message: "Hi. Good news. My attempts to market 'Safety Catch' with bulletin boards is working great. . . . "

Summers grew animated as he thought of the possibilities: 13 million home computers in use--"You're looking at 52 million people. And 25% to 30% have modems." His mind leaped ahead: "If you add on access by half of all high school and university students, that's another 10 million. We could reach 25 million people--free!"

Only the sales receipts will tell who's buying and who's just looking. To date, he said, "No one has said, 'I didn't like it.' " One informant told Summers that the Pentagon, an institution presumably with more than passing interest in computer crime, had posted Chapter 1 on its electronic bulletin board. When Summers called to confirm, he said, the party on the other end of the line "just started to laugh."

Summers spent December playing with his computer but, he insisted, "no more than 20 hours a day."

Writing novels is his luxury. "I would totally starve to death writing novels," he said. The bills are paid, he said, by writing scripts ("The Incredible Hulk," "CHiPs," "Hart to Hart") and with the aid of his wife, Kathleen Dahlberg, a United Airlines flight attendant.

But Summers likes to write novels. Coming out this month from a Canadian publisher is "The Mall," a murder mystery set in a shopping mall. Summers has persuaded Londonderry Mall in Edmonton, Alberta, to buy 3,000 copies in hardcover and stage a "midnight madness" promotion complete with autograph party, discount coupons.

Meanwhile, the jury is out on the great electronic book caper. The question is, said Jane Thornton of Dorchester Publishers: "Will these people stop playing with their computers long enough to buy a book and read it? We're hoping computer people are amenable to picking up something with pages."

Los Angeles Times   *Copyright 2014 Los Angeles Times*   *Index by Keyword | Index by Date | Privacy Policy | Terms of Service*