

Real Authors Writing Fake Books

By KATE TAYLOR

Every time Steve Smith writes a book, he and his publisher discuss whether they should put his name on the front cover and his bio on the back. Every time they decide against it.

“People don’t want to meet Steve Smith,” observes the modest author.

But many fans do want to meet, watch or read Red Green, the comic handyman and life coach who is Smith’s most famous creation. Red Green, star of the eponymous Canadian TV show that reruns on PBS, is the author of four books, the latest of which is *How to Do Everything (From the Man Who Should Know: Red Green)*. It includes advice on subjects ranging from work-life balance and problem teenagers to squeaky floorboards and pooping birds, but it contains no mention of Smith. The comic, who is currently touring a live solo show across the U.S., promotes the book by appearing in character at bookstore signings. He figures he has signed his name more times as the fictional Red Green than as the real Steve Smith, “even though Steve Smith had a 45-year head start.”

As a fake person who has written real books, Red Green is in good company this season, standing alongside advertising executive Roger Sterling and murder-mystery writer Richard Castle, two more fictional authors who had new titles in bookstores in time for Christmas. Both are television characters; Sterling is the ad agency co-owner on the critically acclaimed AMC drama *Mad Men*; Castle is the title character on an ABC crime series.

While writing is simply another medium for Smith to exercise his comic talents, the other TV-character books are primarily marketing vehicles. In Sterling’s case, publisher Grove/Atlantic is making good on a promise made in recent episodes which have featured several references to the memoirs Sterling is supposedly writing and self-publishing. The actual *Sterling’s Gold*, however, is merely a collection of the aphorisms Sterling is fond of spouting on the show – “When God closes a door, he opens a dress,” is a choice example – which can be attributed in real life to the show’s creator, Matthew Weiner.

“The book was created by Matthew Weiner. He worked alongside an editor, but it was his idea,” said Deb Seager, director of publicity at Grove/Atlantic. “It’s a continuation of the show. People love the idea [Sterling] is writing the book.” However, Seager added press material surrounding the release of *Sterling’s Gold* was careful to stress this was not the full memoir that Sterling is apparently writing on the show.

The Castle books, on the other hand, add an extra layer of fiction to the

game. *Heat Wave* and the new *Naked Heat* are not based on the plots of the series but rather are the books the fictional Castle is supposedly writing when he is not shadowing NYPD detective Kate Beckett and solving crimes. They feature a parallel cop, Nikki Heat, and her shadow, Jameson Rook. On the series, Castle refers to the books inspired by Beckett's cases; she is displeased with her alter ego's trashy name.

These books are a good example of the cross-promotional delights of media convergence – publisher Hyperion is owned by the Disney-ABC Television Group, which produces *Castle*. The identity of the author of the Castle books' for Hyperion, which has other TV publishing tie-ins with ABC, is a closely guarded secret. But the show and the books follow a pattern established by the long-running series *Murder She Wrote*. The New American Library has published 36 books attributed to Jessica Fletcher, the fictional murder mystery writer turned sleuth on the show that ran from 1984-1996.

It's actually Donald Bain who writes these first-person accounts of a middle-aged lady sleuth, and, unusually, the writer is actually credited as Fletcher's co-writer on the cover, a marketing decision that surprised even him.

"I assumed I would be an unnamed ghost ... if I wanted to bail out or they wanted to change writers, they could," said Bain, who is working on the 37th Jessica Fletcher mystery, 22 years after he first signed on. The plots are all his own, although while the series was still running the TV writers occasionally borrowed from Bain, and he varies a bit from the show. Despite complaints from the occasional reader, he has given Fletcher a Scotland Yard detective for a love interest instead of the crusty village doctor of the series.

"It's a two-edged sword," Bain said of the assignment. "I have been handed this beloved character created by Angela Lansbury and the writers on the show. On the other hand, it's a little limited. Universal [Studios, which owns the show] vets every manuscript." For example, Universal told Bain to remove a kiss between Fletcher and the Scotland Yard detective from one book.

And readers, who e-mail him by the hundreds, would complain vociferously if he strayed too far from the Fletcher they believe they know intimately.

"I got an e-mail once from a woman who was amazed how much Angela Lansbury looked like Jessica Fletcher," Bain laughs. "I had trouble answering that one." Meanwhile, Lansbury has told him she is regularly stopped by fans and thanked for writing the books. She politely thanks them back.

"Having her name on the book gives credence to the idea she is real, when in fact she's fiction," Bain said. "There is sometimes a confusion on the readers part

between fact and fiction.”

But readers seem to like that confusion and seek out these extensions of the fictional realm. Says Smith of his own anonymity: “People don’t want to see behind the scenes.”