



If Books Could Kill

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BOULDER, Colo.—James Edward Perry was a street preacher and sometime resident of the Michigan state prison system. His business card said "Spiritual Advisor" and "Case Buster," but he hoped to learn another specialty. In his bedroom in a brick rambler in Detroit, he kept a glossy catalogue advertising a trove of 700 educational books and videos.

Sample titles: "Ragnar's Big Book of Homemade Weapons," "Deadly Brew: Advanced Improvised Explosives," "Duty Free: Smuggling Made Easy," "Advanced Lock Picking Secrets."

Perry found two volumes that he liked. In January 1992 he sent a check for \$30 and received "Hit Man: A Technical Manual for Independent Contractors" and "How to Make Disposable Silencers."

Perry's order arrived at the bland Boulder, Colo., headquarters of Paladin Press, and the books went out unremarked at the time. One of the sweet-voiced women who take orders must have typed the invoice. One of the warehouse guys listening to surf music would have pulled the slim volumes from tall stockpiles.

For publisher Peder C. Lund, it was just another sale. Thousands of similar orders come in every month to Paladin, a leading supplier of mayhem manuals, weapons guides, military histories and videotapes. The company Web site boasts of its reputation as "the most dangerous press in America," publishing works that leave "even die-hard advocates of free speech . . . second-guessing their opposition to censorship."



Peder Lund, Publisher of Paladin Press. (Courtesy Boulder Daily Camera)

Who buys? Hobbyists, veterans, thriller writers, law enforcement officers, Walter Mitty fantasizers – and some convicted or accused criminals. Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh bought a copy of Paladin's "Homemade C-4: A Recipe for Survival." Former Maryland GOP Senate candidate Ruthann Aron owned two Paladin books on homemade silencers when she was arrested for allegedly soliciting a hit man to kill her husband.

If Perry studied his books, he learned enough to destroy two families. He followed 22 of the recommendations in "Hit Man" in the March 1993 contract murders of Mildred Horn, her quadriplegic son, Trevor, and Trevor's nurse, Janice Saunders, in Horn's Silver Spring home, according to prosecutors. Among the suggestions: He shot the women through the eyes to ensure their deaths, using a .22-caliber AR-7 rifle, which he modified by drilling out the serial number and running a metal file down the inside of the barrel to foil ballistics tests.

Then he got caught for being stupid – using his real name at a hotel – which the book advises against.

Perry was sentenced to death. Lawrence T. Horn, Mildred's ex-husband, was sentenced to life in prison for hiring Perry.

Now it's Lund's turn in court. In a novel civil lawsuit, relatives of the victims are claiming that he and Paladin "aided and abetted" the murders by publishing "Hit Man." When the case goes to trial next year, it may be the first time since the ink was dry on the Bill of Rights that a book publisher has been alleged to be liable, through the act of publication, for assisting a murder.

Given the stakes, a predictable bit of American mythmaking is underway. This lawsuit is Lund's ticket into the pantheon of characters who teach us how free we are by seeking constitutional protection for their own outrageousness. Lenny Bruce, Larry Flynt . . . Peder Lund?

The alternative myth is that Lund is, quite simply, evil. Instructions on how to kill are different from naughty words or hateful opinions. Lund realized people might get hurt and he didn't care, according to

this viewpoint.

It would be nice if a case involving three murder victims, two shattered families and one founding principle of this nation could be parsed so simply. Complicating matters is that the man at the center of it all is neither a hero nor a monster. He's actually kind of ordinary.

Why isn't that reassuring?

Maintaining Decorum

As cultural demon or First Amendment martyr, America's most dangerous publisher disappoints. No hate-filled Nazi-racist-anarchist-militia rhetoric crosses his lips. He may sell books to people arming for the coming war of all-against-all, but he got rid of his automatic rifle years ago. He's not given to Flyntlike histrionics, either. When in court, he favors dark suits and "no comment" to reporters instead of American-flag diapers and diatribes.

The name is Swedish for Peter (pronounced Pay-Der), from the country of his paternal grandfather. He's 56, married for the fourth time, no kids. He's got a short wavy haircut and rambunctious eyebrows that offer a kind of facial thumbs up! to everything he says.

Self-made, largely self-educated, decorated for heroism in Vietnam, he cultivates the image of a swashbuckler at the intersection of word and deed, a mail-order Andre Malraux. In his modest office he works at an old wooden desk, with his Green Beret tacked to the wall near the Oxford English Dictionary, a loaded Smith & Wesson .357-magnum revolver by the telephone.

But he's a little too eager for you to notice the revolver, which has been on his desk – unused – for years. If you express shock, he smirks and chides you for your stereotypes about gun owners. By now the revolver is a tired prop, drained of meaning.

He flirted with at least three soldier-of-fortune adventures over the years, adding to the slightly kooky warrior-publisher image. But the salient detail is that he had the common sense to drop out of the two nuttier schemes before they got started – a commando rescue of Cuban refugees and a plot to topple Haitian dictator "Papa Doc" Duvalier. During the third adventure, a week-long advisory mission to the Salvadoran army in 1983, he carried a camera, not an M-16.

In a subculture of overgrown boys with guns, he's the adult.

Lund rails about the "nanny state" government "arrogating to itself more and more intrusive and all-pervasive powers," but he dutifully trundles downstairs and outside his office building to obey Boulder's workplace smoking ban.

At bottom, he is rather conventional. "I believe in the law," he claims. "I believe in the system."

His business is conventional, too, in form, if not content. Lund discovered a market in what might be called subversive self-reliance. To reach it, he created a delivery system that is part Sears catalogue for the do-it-yourselfer, part Book-of-the-Month Club. He sought authors to expound on everything you wanted to know but were afraid to ask about anarchy, survivalism, self-defense, homemade arsenals, exotic weapons, murder.

But please, as the label on many of the books says: For academic study only!

Such disclaimers are disingenuous, says Howard Siegel, 50, the Rockville attorney who is leading the families' legal team.

"Paladin Press has established itself intentionally as a correspondence school for crime," Siegel says. "I don't understand why anybody would choose as a human being to engage in a business like this."

It's not that Lund doesn't find some things objectionable. In 1988, he wrote to the author of the then-forthcoming "Revengeville: Sick Humor for the Deranged Mind": "We are editing out some of the more heinous acts you propose as they are not only illegal but in bad taste. Illegality does not particularly trouble me, bad taste always does."

Lund believes the freedom to publish is his, while the duty to act responsibly is his readers'. But he won't publish books on poison (too easy for children to fool with) or altitude-sensitive bombs ("I don't want to be the scapegoat for an airliner being brought down"). But some books he sells do contain passages on poison ("There's no

question some things may have slipped through the cracks").

He won't publish hate literature. Once, according to a major customer who sells Paladin books in his gun store, Lund threatened to cut off the supply if the man also carried racist or antisemitic tracts.

Eventually Lund sold enough books to build a tasteful three-bedroom house 1,000 feet above Boulder, with a back deck offering a spectacular view of foothills covered with ponderosa pines. The home, at the top of a three-quarter mile unpaved driveway, has an interior stone fountain, and it is crammed with art and books not published by Paladin.

Late one afternoon, in the middle of a discussion about freedom and responsibility, he gets up and walks around the corner of the deck. Over the edge, he engages in an act of personal freedom that, at least for now, a man is still entitled to do outside his mountain castle.

"I can pee off the deck, crank my stereo, run around naked, and nobody's going to bother me and I'm not going to bother anybody!" he cheers.

Then America's most dangerous publisher says: "Don't print that. That would be in poor taste."

Work to Do

A few blocks from where the Boulder hippies gather every afternoon to play old Neil Young songs, Paladin's editors and art directors crank out 36 titles a year in an unmarked cluster of three converted homes and a warehouse. With "hundreds of thousands" of books sold annually – Lund won't be more specific – and more than 700 original titles in print, Paladin is at or near the top of the half-dozen publishers in the mayhem field.

Today there are 26 employees, the most in Paladin's history. Just over half are women. They don't wear camouflage. Instead, they sport T-shirts and jeans and sun dresses, as laid back as their boss in shorts and an open-collar shirt. At lunch they go rollerblading and hiking in the hills. Their bulletin boards have pictures of kids and clips of "Cathy" and "The Far Side." The other decorations on the walls are framed book covers: "Homemade Grenade Launchers," "Professional Booby Traps," "Expedient B&E."

Lund strives to be a good boss. Pay, benefits and workplace autonomy are good, purchasing long-term loyalty: Most employees are pushing 10 years or more with the company. Every other year, Lund treats the gang and their spouses to a week at a Mexican resort at the tip of the Baja peninsula.

Some tell stories of answering a vague want ad, then being taken aback upon learning what the business is about. They say they got over it, after reflecting on the First Amendment, being impressed with Lund, and remembering they needed a job, not necessarily in that order.

It didn't feel like the frontier of free expression when Lund and a fellow former Green Beret named Robert K. Brown started Paladin in 1970. They began by reprinting Army manuals, and it was just the two of them, packing books and licking stamps. Brown left after a few years to start Soldier of Fortune magazine.

Paladin is hardly an isolated mutation of the information age. Surplus Army manuals and reprinted versions are available at gun stores, trade shows and in catalogues. The Army's 1969 "Improvised Munitions Handbook" retails in some gun stores for \$15 and teaches how to make grenade launchers and booby traps, and how to mix laundry soap, alcohol and gasoline to produce a napalm-like firebomb. The Justice Department reported last year that recipes for bombs and weapons of mass destruction are widely available, and the information has been used in a number of crimes.

You can peruse Paladin's "Kill Without Joy: The Complete How to Kill Book" in the main reading room of the Library of Congress. The library's copies of "Hit Man" and "Homemade C-4" are missing and presumed stolen. The books meet the library's collection criterion to "possess all books . . . which record the life and achievement of the American people." Such books are sent by publishers or authors to secure copyright protection. "We do not censor or restrict materials," says a library spokeswoman.

Dozens of Paladin titles also are available for online purchase from Internet bookseller Amazon.com. "Hit Man" is \$2 off the list price of \$10. "Ships in 2-3 days." It's also available through Barnes and Noble's Web site and by special order in stores.

Lund also produces many higher-toned works. Paladin's "The Ultimate Sniper" is considered the bible of the craft, used as a reference by the U.S. Army Sniper School at Fort Benning, Ga., and by members of police SWAT teams from Anchorage, Alaska, to Homestead, Fla. The CIA's employee reference library in Langley carries Paladin titles such as "Living in Troubled Lands: The Complete Guide to Personal Security Abroad" and "How to Avoid Electronic Eavesdropping and Privacy Invasion."

Former senator Bob Dole wrote the forward to Paladin's coffee-table history of the Army's skiing 10th Mountain Division. Law enforcement journals review Paladin's books on police science. Even the District's Martin Luther King Library, in the vocational section, carries a Paladin title on suggested "action careers," including gunrunning.

Volatile Words?

The lawsuit, known as Rice v. Paladin, seeks to wipe the patina of constitutional legitimacy off Lund and Paladin. The publishing industry's mantra has always been: Books don't kill, people do. The families' answer is simple: Those who sow dangerous seeds should be held accountable for the fruit they yield.

"I feel great compassion and sympathy for the families, who experienced a horrible tragedy and are reliving it through manipulative lawyers," Lund says.

But he adds: "I feel no moral or ethical responsibility for publishing information. I am not responsible for the misuse of information of whatever type. . . . Any information obtained from Paladin had nothing to do with Perry's predisposition to violence."

"It's not a book, it's a recipe," Siegel, the families' attorney, says of "Hit Man." "Just like a recipe for cookies, the author intends that you follow the recipe and make the cookies. When you give a recipe for murder, and you market and advertise that's what you're doing, then that information is being used exactly as the author intended and the publisher intended."

A coalition of publishers, including The Washington Post Co., signed a brief in support of Paladin at an early stage in the case, warning that if "Hit Man" is kicked out of the First Amendment tent, then mainstream memoirs, realistic novels, movies and music could be exposed to a storm of lawsuits.

But Siegel maintains that if Paladin goes down, the sky will not fall on free expression. He says that, unlike the publisher of "The Day of the Jackal" (a novel about attempting to kill the president of France) or the director of "Natural Born Killers," Lund used a calculated marketing campaign ("Learn . . . how to get in, do the job and get out without getting caught") to promote "Hit Man" to would-be criminals like Perry. That marketing distinguishes "Hit Man" from Hustler magazine and other controversial expression protected by the First Amendment, Siegel says.

Lund first tried and failed to get the case knocked out on First Amendment grounds. A lower court ruled that the book was protected speech, because the printed word is so far removed from action that a book cannot incite imminent lawless activity. But a federal appeals court reversed the ruling, holding that "Hit Man" is a kind of criminal blueprint, like plans for a bank robbery, which is not protected speech.

The Supreme Court declined to hear Paladin's appeal. Now the case is proceeding to trial before a jury, unless Lund wins a last-ditch motion for dismissal later this year.

At trial, the families will seek to prove that Lund intended to reach criminals and knew that sooner or later someone would be killed. They will also have to show that "Hit Man" was useful to Perry.

Lund will counter that he is trying to reach a wide, anonymous audience that might include criminals, and that the book contains a twisted bit of political argument, which is a protected category of speech. Also, he will argue that Perry could have learned the same information from other sources.

"Hit Man" was never a big seller, but the families' lawsuit has helped. After the case was filed in 1996, sales quadrupled to 4,000 copies a year.

In marketing terms, the copy sold to Perry might be called a loss leader. Lund never made a cent on it; the hit man's check bounced.

Hit Woman

Rex Feral, the pseudonymous author of "Hit Man," isn't talking. But some of Lund's other authors will, on the condition that only their pen names be published.

"This business is extremely cyclical and extremely trendy," says Ragnar Benson, one of Lund's most popular authors. "Survivalism is not in anymore. Explosives are not in anymore. Now it's new ID."

Benson is the pseudonym for a 60-year-old agricultural consultant and explosives expert in Idaho. He estimates Lund has sold about 400,000 of his books, including more than two dozen titles such as "Homemade C-4," "Hard-Core Poaching," "Advanced Mantrapping," and "Ragnar's Big Book of Homemade Weapons."

"I think all of my readers are Walter Mittys," Benson says. "They aren't doing this stuff."

What about Timothy McVeigh, who bought a copy of "Homemade C-4," earning Benson about \$2 in royalties? The book is about how to build fertilizer-based bombs, though apparently not the type McVeigh detonated in Oklahoma City.

"I think it provided general background for him," Benson says. "He could have looked at any number of Army field manuals."

Lund's best-selling book has been "Get Even: The Complete Book of Dirty Tricks," with almost 150,000 hardcover copies sold, which some mainstream bookstores carry in the humor section. The author is George Hayduke, who took his pen name from a character in Edward Abbey's "The Monkey Wrench Gang."

Rex Feral's 1983 book purports to be based on his experiences as a hit man. To read it is to suffer through 133 pages of alternately horrifying, ludicrous, boring and juvenile prose. The cover features a cartoon gunman bearing a passing resemblance to Dick Tracy.

"It is my opinion," Feral tells us in the preface, "that the professional hit man fills a need in society and is, at times, the only alternative for 'personal' justice. . . . [I]t becomes necessary for a man of action to step in and do what is required: a special man for whom life holds no real meaning and death holds no fear, a man who faces death as a challenge and feels the victory each time he walks away the winner."

Unfortunately, committing cliché macho dreck remains judgment-proof. These are passages that Lund's attorneys plan to characterize as constitutionally protected political speech, a spirited attack on the deficiency of the criminal justice system.

The attorneys will have more trouble explaining sentences like this: "If you must do your shooting from a distance, use a rifle with a good scope and silencer and aim for the head – preferably the eye sockets if you are a sharpshooter."

Paladin's catalogue ad for "Hit Man" says: "Rex Feral kills for hire. Some consider him a criminal. Others think him a hero. In truth, he is a lethal weapon aimed at those he hunts."

In truth, Rex Feral was a divorced mother of two when she wrote "Hit Man" in 1983. Originally, she submitted a novel. But Paladin's editors wanted a how-to book.

She got her ideas "from books, television, movies, newspapers, police officers, my karate instructor, and a good friend who is an attorney," according to a letter she wrote to a Paladin editor at the time. She scribbled notes "on paper towels or whatever else was available when an idea struck."

"No, I am not a hit man," the letter goes on. "I don't even own a gun. But don't tell anybody."

So, in a way, "Hit Man," narrated partly in the first person by a contract killer, is a hoax, a fiction.

The author told her editor that she needed a book advance of a couple thousand dollars to pay her property taxes.

How ordinary.

Tall Orders

Back at Paladin, editors are readying books on Civil War knives and close-combat encounters. An editor steps into Lund's office to retrieve an armful of new manuscripts, including one called "Hustler's Handbook."

"A definite maybe?" says the editor.

"A definite maybe not," says Lund. "It was bad writing and repetitious."

Out in the warehouse, the surf music is cranked. Nick Contos, 22, is filling orders.

He roams the aisles of wooden shelves piled with books, reading from a sheaf of invoices. He passes the stack of shiny purple copies of "Hit Man" but does not stop. No sales of that today.

Someone in Aiken, S.C., wants "Kill or Get Killed" and "Far Beyond Defensive Tactics."

Hello, Albuquerque, N.M.: "The 100 Deadliest Karate Moves," "Mental Training of a Warrior," "Fighting Power," "The Ultimate Street Fighter."

Ready or not, Tulsa, Okla.: "U.S. Marine Corps Scout/Sniper Training Manual" and "Dim-Mak: Death Point Striking."

Greetings, Seymour, Tenn.: "Tactical Concealed Carry I" and "Tactical Pistol I."

More sales, more satisfied customers. Countless seeds of information, sowed across the land.

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