



ON THE SHELF

Authenticity: What Consumers Really Want – Joseph H Gilmore and B Joseph Pine II

For the past decade or so – well, at least the past seven years – it's been all about branding. Brands have branding, as do celebrity dogs. Actors pass on dubious roles by saying, "It's not my brand, man." There's a lot of talk about how branding is based on real values and beliefs, but as we see every time a "brand" goes sideways (Mel Gibson getting shirty and anti-semitic when pulled over for drunk driving; the exploits of Britney Spears; Northern Rock's unrock-like debacle and anything to do with George W. Bush) most brands are more contrived than real.

The point Gilmore and Pine make is that consumers are demanding that things be real, which can be interpreted in a number of ways,

from values that are not determined by a large and addle-brained committee to brands that say "o" to so-called improvements, proudly continuing to produce buggy whips as they always have. This desire for authenticity can be seen in brands that publicise their history, their traditions, their "backstories".

Is this any more "real" than a manufactured history? (Remember the Purdue chicken man who turned out not to be Mr Purdue at all, but an even less-photogenic actor who seemed somehow more Purdue-like?) And will the desire for authenticity play a role in the upcoming US elections? Will Mike Huckabee's guitar riffs have quite the same effect as Bill Clinton's wailing sax on Saturday Night Live? Watch this space. – JOANNA HUGHES

The Reavers – George MacDonald Fraser

Wherever he is now, I hope George MacDonald Fraser is having a hell of a good time. The author of *The Flashman Papers* passed away last month, and *The Reavers* is his last published book. It's not a *Flashman* book, but a lively, silly, funny, picaresque satire of modern life set in late Elizabethan times. (I'm not sure you can have a picaresque satire – I think it then becomes a burlesque – but it seems somehow Anti-Fraser to get picky about these things.)

At any rate, *The Reavers* grew out of several earlier works, including a BBC Radio play, set along the Scottish border in the late 16th Century. Let all historical accuracy end there. Fraser himself warns any PhD candidate specifically not to use *The Reavers* for a dissertation; the idea of the book is to have fun. Fraser's blessedly brief foreword begins with the line: "This book is nonsense", and continues on to say: "I might describe it as an octogenarian's rebuke to a generation which seems to have forgotten fun and become obsessed with misery, disaster, illness, operations, violence, climate change, guilt, obesity, cookery, football, racism, politics and a general sense of doom. But not being serious as the literary world understands the term, I can offer no such pretentious excuse. *The Reavers* is simply GMF taking off on what a learned judge would call a frolic of his own."

The book takes the piss out of modern day Britain, romance novels, the continuing fascination with QEI, swordplay and the Spanish Inquisition. Oh, and there's a loin-cloth clad dwarf armed with a blow gun whose aim is impaired by a bad cold. And being Fraser, there are lots of heaving bosoms and flashing, manly smiles.

– JOANNA HUGHES

