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Ideas & Trends:

Serious Book to Peddle? Don't Laugh, Try a Comedy Show

by Julie Bosman

FEW authors, no matter how serious or scholarly, can afford to be so stubbornly Pynchonesque as to refuse to participate in a book tour. If they want to sell books, that is.

But fewer still could have guessed until recently that their best pitchmen and most engaged interviewers would be the comedians of late-night cable.

Take Muhammad Yunus, the Bangladeshi "banker to the poor" who recently appeared on "The Daily Show With Jon Stewart" on Comedy Central after it was announced that he had won the Nobel Peace Prize.

"Tell me about microfinancing and microlending," Mr. Stewart asked earnestly. "Because there's a theory that you developed through your work in economics that has really proven to be incredibly effective in fighting poverty."

Mr. Stewart has also interviewed Ishmael Beah, the young Sierra Leonian who just published "A Long Way Gone," a memoir about his wrenching experience as a child soldier; Jeffrey Rosen, the George Washington University law professor who wrote "The Supreme Court: The Personalities and Rivalries That Defined America"; and Vali Nasr, the Middle East expert who was promoting "The Shia Revival," an examination of ethnic conflict in Iraq.

Since when did microlending, global poverty, constitutional law and civil wars in Africa become topics for frank discussion on fake-news comedy shows?

Publishers say that particularly for the last six months, "The Daily Show" and its spinoff, "The Colbert Report," which has on similarly wonky authors, like the former White House official David Kuo, have become the most reliable venues for promoting weighty books whose authors would otherwise end up on "The Early Show" on CBS looking like they showed up at the wrong party.

Mr. Yunus's appearance gave a jump-start to his national press tour and sent his rank on the online bookseller Amazon soaring, said Susan Weinberg, who is the publisher of PublicAffairs. "It was our piŠce de r,sistance," Ms. Weinberg said. "It had a huge impact on the book."

Tony Fox, a spokesman for Comedy Central, said that though "The Daily Show" has been on the air since 1996, the number of authors featured has increased significantly in the last five years.

Authors are treated to a fairly straight conversation with Mr. Stewart, but Stephen Colbert, who remains in character as a Bill O'Reilly-type commentator, can be a more challenging interviewer who forces the author to play along with his schtick. "It's a different experience," Ms. Weinberg said wryly.

Television programs that devote significant attention to serious authors have practically gone the way of the illuminated manuscript, publishers lament. Brian Lamb's long-running "Booknotes" program on C-Span was permanently shuttered in 2004. "The Charlie Rose Show" doesn't generate as much buzz as it used to or translate into higher sales after an author appearance, some publishers say. And the morning shows seem to prefer a bad Britney to a good book.

Many publishers shrug off "The Tonight Show With Jay Leno" on NBC and "Late Show With David Letterman" on CBS, saying they are too celebrity-driven to be interested in serious authors, and usually fail to generate a bump in sales anyway.

All that's left are programs like "60 Minutes" on CBS, "Imus in the Morning" on MSNBC, "Larry King Live" on CNN, and, of course, "Oprah" all extremely competitive venues for placing an author.

"The people who have abandoned us have abandoned us," said Martha K. Levin, the publisher of Free Press, which last fall released "In the Line of Fire," a memoir by Gen. Pervez Musharraf, the president of Pakistan. "Particularly for nonfiction, we are so dependent on media. And television has an impact that is unparalleled."

But the Comedy Central shows are also becoming extremely competitive for publicists placing their authors. After a "Daily Show" appearance, several publishers said, the author's Amazon ranking rises and the daily sales figures "pop," in industry parlance. It is not at all unusual, one book publicist said, for a title to go from a 300,000 rank to a spot in the Top 300 not often the case after shows like "Charlie Rose."

"If I had my choice between Charlie Rose and Jon Stewart, I'd pick Jon Stewart, no question," said one publicist who spoke anonymously because she didn't want to anger the bookers on "Charlie Rose."

About a year ago, publicists began noticing that Mr. Stewart was interviewing serious authors, said Lissa Warren, the senior director of publicity for Da Capo Press. "It was almost an 'oh my God' moment," she said. "There aren't that many television shows that will have on serious authors. And when they do have one, it's almost startling."

Part of the surprise, publishers said, is that the Comedy Central audience is more serious than its reputation allows. The public may still think of the "Daily Show" and "Colbert Report" audience as a group of sardonic slackers, Gen-Y college students who prefer YouTube to print. But publishers say it's a much more diverse demographic and more important, a book-buying audience.

"It's the television equivalent of NPR," Ms. Levin, of Free Press, said. "You have a very savvy, interested audience who are book buyers, people who do go into bookstores, people who are actually interested in books."

According to Nielsen Media Research, the nightly audience for "The Daily Show" averages about 1.6 million, while "The Colbert Report" attracts an average of 1.2 million. ("The 1/2 Hour News Hour" on Fox, the conservative answer to the Comedy Central shows, had its premiere with 1.5 million viewers last Sunday but does not plan to do author interviews, a Fox spokeswoman said.)

Michael Mandelbaum, a professor of American foreign policy at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies in Washington, said during his interview last year on "The Daily Show" to promote "The Case for Goliath," Mr. Stewart drew out the most important themes of the book points that were ignored by other interviewers.

"In my experience, it's not just that serious books get a hearing on comedy shows," Mr. Mandelbaum said. "But serious books get a serious hearing, as well as a funny one, on comedy shows."

And if it is true that comedy thrives on opposites, then perhaps the combination of serious and slapstick makes perfect sense. "They can be themselves on the show," said Mr. Fox of Comedy Central, describing the dynamic between authors and Mr. Stewart. "They can be the straight guy and he's the funny guy."

Not that Mr. Stewart injects comedy into every interview. He all but wept when he interviewed Mr. Beah, saying, "I've rarely read a book that makes my heart hurt but this really does."

Jeff Seroy, a spokesman for Farrar, Straus and Giroux, Mr. Beah's publisher, said the Stewart appearance had a huge effect, doubling the online sales of the book the day after the show.

Mr. Seroy said that in meeting Mr. Beah before the show Mr. Stewart said, "I don't know how I'm going to make this funny."

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