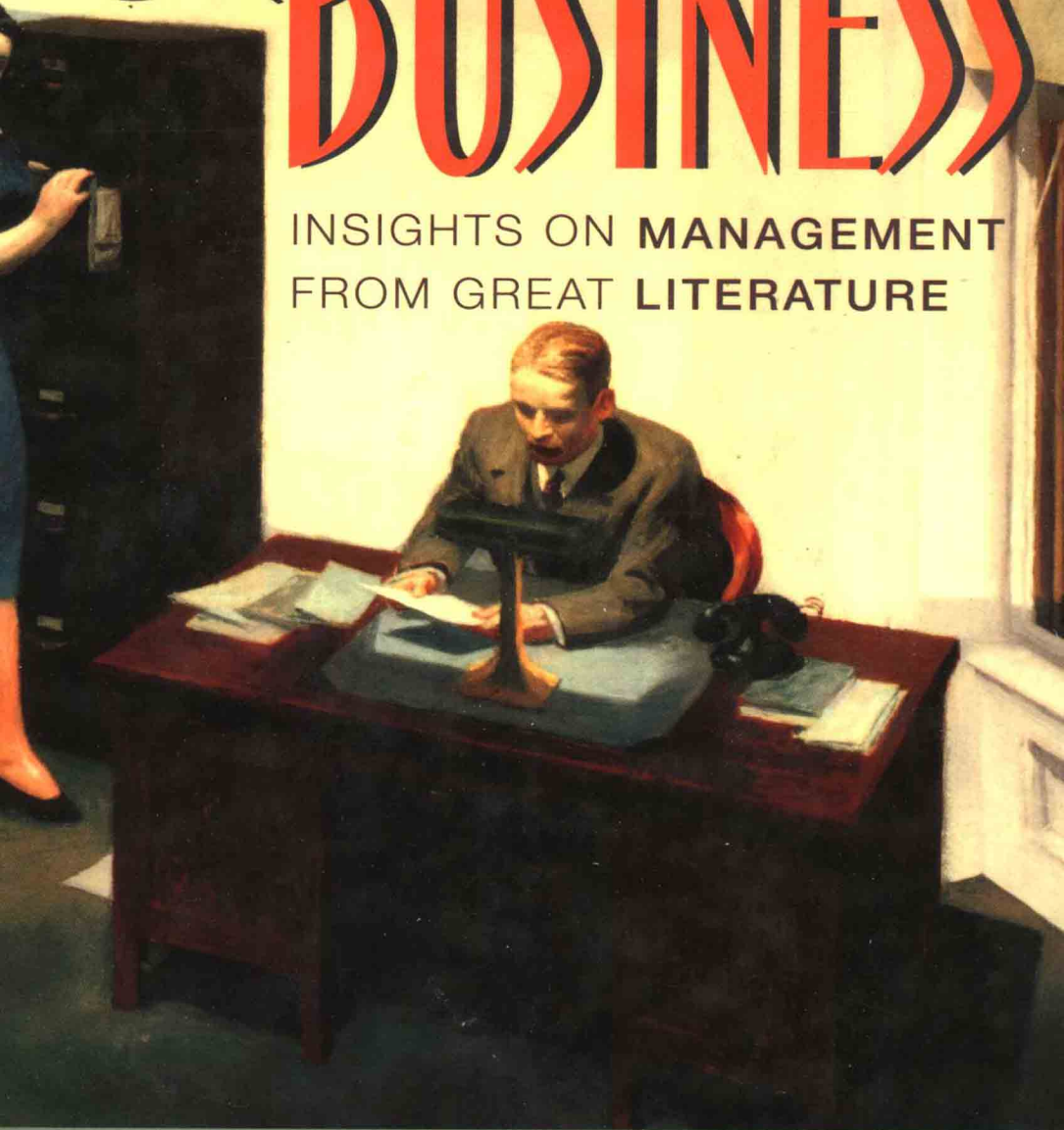


FICTIONS OF BUSINESS

INSIGHTS ON MANAGEMENT
FROM GREAT LITERATURE



ROBERT A. BRAWER

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*Insights on Management
from Great Literature*

Robert A. Brawer

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CONTENTS

Introduction: The Fictions of Business and the Business of Fiction 1

1. Selling as Theater: The Art of Dazzling the Customer 9

Success in today's consumer-driven world requires, above all, a sense of theater. Entrepreneurs' ability to conjure up images and illusions that confer a unique value on their goods and services is their key to success in a saturated global market. This chapter discusses two works of fiction that offer a fresh perspective on how successful salespeople can convince us to buy what we may not need—or even want: Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* and David Mamet's *Glengarry Glen Ross*.

2. Selling on a Grand Scale: Playing to an Image-Conscious Society 35

The truly “self-made man” of Horatio Alger fame often does not conform to the rags-to-riches stereotype. Instead, many “self-made” businesspeople merely create for themselves an image, or an illusion of success, that generates positive perceptions from society. This chapter com-

pares the real world with the fictional by discussing Horatio Alger's *Ragged Dick* as well as two other works of fiction whose characters have succeeded solely on their self-made images: Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* and Anthony Trollope's *The Way We Live Now*.

3. Maintaining Individuality in Corporate Life 61

The fear of losing our individuality and becoming just a cog in the corporate wheel is part of American business mythology. This chapter discusses three works of fiction that demonstrate how self-awareness is the key to being a self-empowered manager and, alternately, how the failure to be honest with ourselves can be personally and professionally disabling: Sloan Wilson's *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit*, Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, and John P. Marquand's *Point of No Return*.

4. Overcoming Corporate Gospel and the Will to Believe 101

The predisposition to believe what we want to believe and to screen out what runs counter to our interests and biases is endemic to corporate life: Managers often tend to reinforce one another's opinions and to expedite action plans rather than to scrutinize the data and assumptions that underlie them. This chapter discusses two works of fiction that show us how vulnerable we are to the will to believe and how self-defeating it can be to adhere to corporate gospel: Joseph Heller's *Something Happened* and George Bernard Shaw's *Major Barbara*.

5. Survival of the Fittest in a Darwinian Business World 139

“Survival of the fittest” characterizes much of business today. Self-interest and efficiency are critical to success, but not at the expense of ethical responsibility and compassion toward the people we manage and the customers we serve. This chapter discusses five works of fiction that can help us assess our corporate values and responsibility to the larger community: Theodore Dreiser’s *The Financier*, Sinclair Lewis’s *Babbitt*, John Dos Passos’s *The Big Money*, Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle*, and Mark Twain’s *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court*.

6. Office Politics, Stress Management, and Chaos 185

Dealing with personality conflicts and office politics is sometimes a manager’s most demanding, infuriating, and time-consuming responsibility. It therefore requires the utmost ingenuity and resourcefulness. This chapter discusses three works of fiction that illustrate how some managers deal effectively—and some not so effectively—with people fighting for power (sometimes literally): Wilfred Sheed’s *Office Politics*, James Thurber’s “The Catbird Seat,” and Joseph Conrad’s “Typhoon.”

Conclusion: The More Things Change . . . 221

Notes 225

A Working Man and Woman's Guide to Further Reading	229
Acknowledgments	241
Index	243

INTRODUCTION: THE FICTIONS OF BUSINESS AND THE BUSINESS OF FICTION

The most complex and persistent problems facing us as managers and executives in corporate life are often distinctively human problems. How do we maintain our individuality in adapting to the corporate culture? How do we maintain our personal integrity when corporate gospel compels unquestioned assent? How can we reconcile what we owe ourselves as individuals with our responsibilities to the companies we represent? How can we manage interpersonal conflicts without disrupting the organization? How can we keep our perspectives in a consumer-driven society in which everyone is vulnerable to the selling of image and illusion? How can we balance self-interest and efficiency with humane values in a world where only the fittest survive? These and related issues are recurrent; they compel our attention, and they call less on our professional expertise than on our personal resources and judgment.

I have always felt that imaginative literature is an invaluable but untapped resource for executives trying to under-

stand and resolve perennial human problems in business. I say *human* problems advisedly. Novels and plays about corporate life are impractical in that they provide no guidance about the intricacies of production control, demographics, information systems, or accounting. They do help us, though, to understand our basic needs and those of the people we manage: the need for identity, for self-esteem, for power, for control, for mental challenge, for acceptance, for security, for self-fulfillment, and for recognition.

Imaginative writers demonstrate how these fundamental motives which also drive us as individuals affect our attitudes, behaviors, and decisions as executives. In addition, they show us what the consequences of our actions will likely be. The hindsight that writers give us is a real advantage, since we are so often unable to see beyond the immediate moment or situation; and we often have trouble resolving distinctively human issues in the workplace with finality.

Immersion in the world of imaginative writing clearly has nothing directly to do with maintaining a respectable bottom line, controlling inventory levels, or drafting a marketing plan. I would insist, however, that the values and insights we glean from serious literature sensitize us to ourselves and, by extension, to the problems inherent in managing people in an organization. I mean to cite chapter and verse, quite literally, in showing that intelligent managers can profit at least as much from reading distinguished novelists and playwrights who have taken businesspeople and our business-oriented culture as a literary subject, as they can, for instance, from reading any number of management

handbooks offering easy-to-fathom panaceas for beleaguered companies.

Who *are* the people who populate the enduring novels and plays about life in business? Memorable people, to be sure. Among them is an astute arms manufacturer who disdains the poor and all forms of charity. Another is an ingratiating real estate salesman adept at convincing people to invest their life savings in property they will never see. Yet another is an imposing tycoon who, in a dog-eat-dog world, rides roughshod over conventional morality in his lust for wealth and power. I have deliberately singled out individuals whom we might ordinarily shun. Yet they possess qualities that command our attention as managers and executives: an indestructible belief in themselves combined with an equally solid sense of what it takes to succeed in the real world.

I feel as if I know each of these people intimately. Strictly speaking, they are no more than figments of the imagination. A writer's imagination. Yet George Bernard Shaw's industrialist, Andrew Undershaft; David Mamet's salesman, Richard Roma; and Theodore Dreiser's financier, Frank Cowperwood, engage us as businesspeople and as individuals because what they are made to say and do reflects what we can imagine ourselves saying and doing under generally similar circumstances. Whenever I think about these characters, the artificial boundaries we erect between fact and fiction, the real world and the world of the imagination, quickly dissolve.

The claims I make for applying the insights gained from fiction to the realities of the workplace derive mainly from my own double orientation, first as a faculty member of a

university English department and, later, as an executive and CEO of Maidenform, Inc., an internationally recognized women's apparel firm. Few can appreciate, as I do, the mental gulf that exists between professions so dissimilar in character and aim. Over my 20-year life as an executive, I was constantly asked by business associates how it felt being in the "real" world. The answer I gave was surprising and even puzzling to many people. I said I wasn't sure I was currently in the "real" world, since my present job as a marketer of a venerable American brand—creating and sustaining "brand equity"—dealt as much with perception as with actuality. Brand equity is the sum total of all the perceptions consumers have about a brand and its consequent value for them. Long-term profitable growth, a real enough goal for management, depends on capturing the minds of consumers, so that they will buy your product, even at a premium, rather than another brand offering similar functional benefits. My own objective as a marketing executive was to generate, primarily through national consumer advertising, positive perceptions of our brand as the brand of choice.

Now without being philosophical, you could argue that the perception is the reality. I would insist only that the profession of teaching English has as legitimate a claim to reality as does the world of business. It is just as vital for good teachers to engage the minds of their students as it is for professional marketers to capture the minds of their target audiences.

Our tendency to compartmentalize our professions and disciplines is widespread. Work and leisure, the life of the mind and the practical life, the humanities and commerce, writers and businesspeople, seem mutually exclusive. Yet the

distinctions we commonly draw between the world of commerce and the world of the imagination have little historical or theoretical basis. Geoffrey Chaucer, the fourteenth-century author of *The Canterbury Tales*, spent more of his time as a controller of customs and royal building projects than as a poet reciting his stories on demand at the court of Richard II. Similarly, the author of *The Merchant of Venice* was a shrewd businessman who came by his knowledge of contracts, finance, and business risk in the process of handling his own affairs. In fact, until the mid-nineteenth century in America, merchants thought of themselves and were generally regarded as men of intellect and culture. Indeed, a humanistic education was regarded as a distinct advantage in commercial enterprises.

For me, the genius of George Bernard Shaw lies in his ability to puncture the stereotypes we find so comfortable and comforting to create. The munitions manufacturer, Andrew Undershaft, and his daughter's fiancé, a pedantic professor of Greek, appear to be natural adversaries in *Major Barbara*—that is, until we are made to realize how self-serving the professor is and, to the contrary, how Undershaft, the capitalist, embodies the virtues of a humanistic culture.

The fictions of business are indispensable to us because it is the business of fiction to recreate the world we know, or think we know, to make us see it—and ourselves—with new eyes. The examples I select to illustrate some of the universal human issues in business range across the centuries. In the kinds of insights they offer, though, they are equally current. Why? Because they do *not* traffic in the fashionable buzzwords and managerial ideologies of the day, but rather stimulate reflection on the motives, ideas, and principles

that govern human affairs, regardless of time, place, and circumstances.

By its nature, this book is a hybrid. It is neither a historical survey of novels and plays about business, nor a history of Maidenform, nor a personal memoir of my career with the company until my retirement in 1995. Rather, it is a series of essays intended to offer fresh perspectives on familiar business problems through a synthesis of these elements. I mix in more or less equal parts my experiences as an insatiable reader and teacher of serious fiction and as an executive engaged with the kinds of issues that typically require creativity and imagination for their resolution. If there is an overall theme that emerges from this witches' brew, it is that the distinctions between art and life, the real world and the world of fiction, are far too slight to be significant.

The six chapters that follow explore human issues that have engaged me constantly over the course of my working life. Chapter One, "Selling as Theater: The Art of Dazzling the Customer," highlights the importance of image and illusion in American business life and, at the same time, our own vulnerability to purveyors of illusion. Chapter Two, "Selling on a Grand Scale: Playing to an Image-Conscious Society," looks at the effect, for better and worse, of assorted "self-made" individuals on a society driven by commercial values. Chapter Three, "Maintaining Individuality in Corporate Life," emphasizes the need to preserve a sense of your personal identity and integrity while satisfying the requirements of the organization. Chapter Four, "Overcoming Corporate Gospel and the Will to Believe," is about how a company's collective faith in its own doctrine can disable it. Chapter Five, "Survival of the Fittest in a Darwinian Busi-

ness World," examines the strengths as well as limitations of the values required for adapting to a business environment where only the fittest survive. Chapter Six, "Office Politics, Stress Management, and Chaos," examines both the responsibilities of a leader in containing the interpersonal conflicts that sap the strength of an organization and the various options he or she has in resolving them.

A common complaint on the part of managers nowadays is that they are on information overload, ingesting rather than digesting what comes down to them along the "information highway." On the other hand, reading fiction, while also time-consuming, is interactive. We cannot help but reflect on both the relationship between fictional characters and the dilemmas they face and our own experiences and observations of the contemporary business world. Each chapter, therefore, interweaves fictional business situations and characters with their real-life counterparts. I do not expect this double perspective to yield automatic resolutions to the issues I have raised here. Rather, I intend wherever possible to stimulate reflection on the variety of ways in which we might better understand and deal with these issues. It would be difficult to confer with more eminent consultants for this purpose than English and American writers of the caliber of Geoffrey Chaucer, Anthony Trollope, Joseph Conrad, George Bernard Shaw, Theodore Dreiser, Sinclair Lewis, John Dos Passos, James Thurber, John P. Marquand, Arthur Miller, Joseph Heller, and David Mamet. I might add that a subsidiary aim of this book is to encourage the reading of the works discussed here in their entirety, not only as fiction about life in business, but also for the sheer enjoyment they offer as fiction.



SELLING AS THEATER: THE ART OF DAZZLING THE CUSTOMER

A guy comes up to you. . . . "There're these properties I'd like for you to see." What does it mean? What you want it to mean.

David Mamet, *Glengarry Glen Ross*

If I were asked to identify a single characteristic that the best businesspeople have in common, I would say that it is a sense of theater. Like theatrical impresarios, they have mastered the art of illusion: creating the perception in the minds of their customers that the product or service they are selling has a unique value that transcends the usual "features and benefits," and does more than satisfy customer "wants or needs." Like great actors, these businesspeople are as adept at selling themselves as they are their products. Like great playwrights, they know their audience and understand how to make their customers feel good about doing business with them. Indeed, they may even change the way their customers look at *themselves*.

In today's consumer-driven culture, I maintain that this kind of salesmanship—or more accurately, *showmanship*—is more than an entrepreneurial virtue. It is a necessity. How many enterprises, after all, depend for their sustained profitability on “impulse purchases,” on enticing people to spend money on things they may *not* want or need as much as on those they do? Without a sense of theater, an entrepreneur is hard put to survive in a global market where duplication of product offerings creates seemingly unlimited choice, where so many new products proliferate and so few survive, where shelf space is so scarce and shelf life so short, where established worldwide brands are threatened by cheaper private label imitations.

In fact, American merchants' recognition that great theater and great salesmanship are indissolubly linked spans the entire twentieth century. The department store retailers whose stores have survived the century were pioneers in theatrical display. From lavish window displays and opulent decor to counter fixtures and costumed mannequins, merchant-impresarios like Marshall Field, John Wanamaker, and R. H. Macy made the shopping experience a kind of fantasy fulfillment for a mass market. We find this sense of theater articulated even in so unlikely a place as the “Minutes of the Board of Operations” at Macy's in 1902: “The selling departments is [sic] the stage upon which the play is enacted.”¹

In his 1900 novel, *Sister Carrie*, Theodore Dreiser captures the blandishments of a consumer culture most vividly. At the beginning of the novel, Carrie Meeber, a poor farm girl from Wisconsin recently arrived in Chicago, is dazzled

by the display of goods in a department store where she has gone to seek work as a clerk:

[The department stores] were handsome, bustling, successful affairs, with a host of clerks and a swarm of patrons. Carrie passed along the busy aisles, much affected by the remarkable displays of trinkets, dress goods, stationery, and jewelry. Each separate counter was a show place of dazzling interest and attraction. She could not help feeling the claim of each trinket and valuable upon her personally, and yet she did not stop. There was nothing there which she could not have used—nothing which she did not long to own. The dainty slippers and stockings, the delicately frilled skirts and petticoats, the laces, ribbons, haircombs, purses, all touched her with individual desire, and she felt keenly the fact that not any of these things were in the range of her purchase.²

The desire that Dreiser's Carrie feels here is not simply the longing of a lonely young woman in the big city for the first time. It is an enduring characteristic of American consumers in a land of plenty. So, too, is the ingenuity with which American retailers continue to fabricate ever more theatrical scenarios to feed the public's apparently insatiable appetite for shopping—or, as promoters say nowadays, for a shopping *experience*.

There is a clear trajectory from Marshall Field's first showcase window to the recently unveiled theme mall in Las Vegas, "unlike anything the retail world has ever seen," according to a recent *Wall Street Journal* report.³ A 50-foot