

SCIENTOLOGY'S BEST SELLER

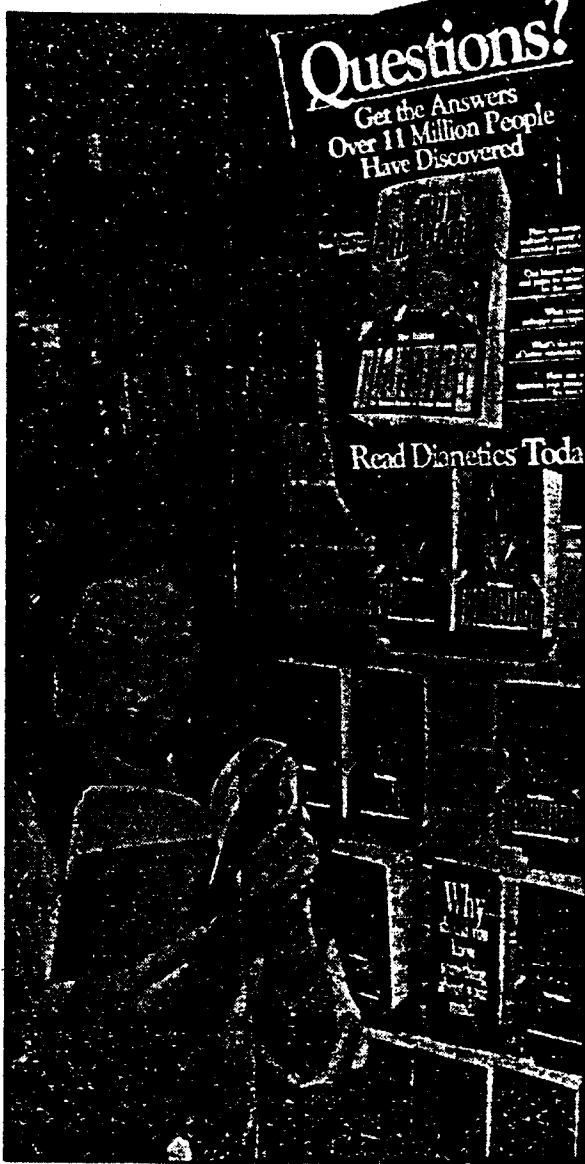
Savvy marketers, blurring ties to California 'church,' keep 40-year-old tract at top of the list

By DANIEL HARRIS

EVEN the strongest stomach at this summer's American Booksellers convention must have heaved in protest when comely goons hired by Bridge Publications, the publishing arm of the Church of Scientology, marched up and down the aisles of the auditorium literally setting ablaze a book by L. Ron Hubbard — a "hot" author, get it? — a man who is said to have improved the lives (if not the careers) of such celebrities as Sonny Bono and John Travolta. Judging from their faces, few of the onlookers would have reached for the fire extinguisher had these natty book-burners performed the same trick on the remaining 83 million copies Bridge Publications claims to have sold. But it's not just matches that have kept Hubbard's *Dianetics* smouldering on the best seller lists for so long; the book owes much of its success to its publisher's ability to make it seem as if the volume were hot off the presses when in fact it was published nearly 40 years ago. Since then, it has made its way onto the New York Times Best Seller list no fewer than 92 times. Year after year, *Dianetics* is marketed as if it were as fresh as the morning dew, appearing in the major chains right alongside recent releases in the book "dumps," the upright cardboard cases publishers pay bookstores to display tempting new booty within wallet's-reach of the cash register.

As a publishing phenomenon, it's the *Dorian Gray* of blockbusters, for the older it gets the newer it seems, with dazzling foil covers in six iridescent colors scheduled to wow book buyers in the fall. In recent years the book has sold up to 450,000 copies a year. Add that number to the 11 million already reportedly sold and you have quite a dependable success for the work of church founder, the late L. Ron Hubbard, a man who, according to a new biography by Bent Corydon (*L. Ron Hubbard: Messiah or Madman*, published by Lyle Stuart), believed that as the Duke of Medici in a former life he wrote *The Prince* ("that son-of-a-bitch Machiavelli stole it from me"), who claimed he was once Robespierre, who allegedly spiked his son's bubblegum with phenobarbital, who is said to have been a bigamist, who is reported to have made people clap when he entered the room and who is a quoted as goading his followers with exhortations such as the following: "When Miss Pattycake comes to us to be taught, turn that wandering doubt in her eye into a fixed dedicated glare and she'll win and we'll all win."

And they all won. How did Bridge Publications do it? With saturation bombing of the Literary Industrial Complex and one of the most aggressive marketing campaigns ever launched by a publisher. Dara Tyson at the Connecticut headquarters of Waldenbooks believes that what sets the



PERUSING: Chris Cannon looks through an L. Ron Hubbard paperback at Waldenbooks on Park Avenue.

publicists at Bridge apart is that they don't lean so heavily on normal advertising outlets such as the book pages of newspapers and magazines, favoring instead forums such as the backs of the metro passes in Washington, D.C., or an enormous sign in Candlestick Park presented under the aegis of the San Francisco Giants. Bridge is a great proponent of the idea that one must stoop in order to conquer, so it employs promotional gimmicks like bumper stickers, buttons, banners, billboards, balloons, baseball caps, hats, contests, T-shirts, sweepstakes, rock albums, television spots, a car in the Indianapolis 500, a car in LeMans, a jaunt on the first civilian space flight with a company called Space Expeditions, talk show appearances, as well as "Dianetics Today," a new half-hour TV promotional circus. It's not surprising to learn that Hubbard once said that one of the people he admired most was P.T. Barnum.

Of course, not all the success of Hubbard's books can be attributed to the marketing wizardry of Bridge Publications and its executive director, Len Forman, who was a publicity vice president at Simon & Schuster before he hung out his lantern at Bridge. Long after Hubbard made his famous statement that "if you really want to make a million, the quickest way is to start your own religion," he sold so-called Scientology "franchises," "a sort of religious non-profit McDonald's" according to Corydon's biography. He reports that in 1980 church executives started selling do-it-yourself franchise kits to well-heeled members of the Scientology fold — "starter packs" that sold for \$35,000 apiece, contained \$10,000 worth of Hubbard's books and granted "investors" the papal bull, so to speak, to set up their own parishes. According to Corydon and other sources, soon after Bridge Publications began minting astronomical numbers of cop-

ies, orders also went out that church officials as well as newly recruited members were to report to bookstores and scarf up the Hubbard stock, presumably to inflate sales statistics and start the snowball rolling.

And then, of course, when you're "in this for blood," as Hubbard once said, it doesn't hurt to have major book conglomerates as well as prestigious public relations firms, including the venerable Hill & Knowlton, lend a helping hand. I called several of these companies to see if they have any reservations about selling or marketing the books of a religion that by several accounts has physically threatened its critics, forcibly detained disaffected members and may have followed Hubbard's "Fair Game" policy, which, as quoted in *Forbes* magazine,

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states that those opposed to Scientology "may be deprived of property or injured by any means by any Scientologist..."

First of all, I asked Tyson at Waldenbooks, one of the largest retail outlets for Bridge Publications. Her response: "Hey, their books sell, and that's what we're here for."

I asked the same question of Mary Graybill of Boonshaft, Lewis and Savatch, a Los Angeles public relations firm that helps design the marketing campaigns for Hubbard's sci-fi books. Her response: "Certainly these are things we've all thought about, but as far as we're concerned, these are all rumors. I wouldn't work for them if these things were true." After I pointed out that many people believe such rumors, she went on to say, "Well, look, you work for who pays you. They're a client, after all."

I asked the same question of Greg LaBrache at Hill & Knowlton. Answer: laughter and then, "I don't know a lot about the Scientologists, and so far as I know there isn't any proof that they did these things." Evidently I must have struck a nerve, however, because he immediately called me back — no laughter this time — to say "Mr. Harris, YOU are an impostor," having been misinformed by the City Desk at *The Post* that I didn't work for them. Why the anger? Is Hill & Knowlton ashamed of something?

Finally, I asked the same question of Len Forman, the mastermind behind the success of *Dianetics* and one of the few people who is not a Scientologist at Bridge. Question: Do you have any reservations about promoting the work of a man who is widely believed to have forcibly detained uncooperative members of the church and who is said to have intimidated and harassed his critics? Answer: "So did Jesus Christ,

for that matter."

In addition to having friends in the right places, Bridge Publications promotes Hubbard's books by quietly disassociating itself from Scientology. In its entry on Bridge, *The Literary Market Place* says the company sells books about human potential, self-improvement, education, management technology, fiction, and science fiction, but in fact it only publishes the books of L. Ron Hubbard and its Writers of the Future series, an annual anthology organized by Hubbard to encourage amateur sci-fi aficionados. Moreover, none of the television advertisements for *Dianetics* mentions the fact that this is the central text of Scientology; the book's jacket also says nothing about the church but depicts instead an exploding volcano, a subliminal symbol, that, according to Corydon, Hubbard believed would hypnotize managers of bookstores and turn them into obedient vendors for the religion. ("Who knows?" Tyson somewhat eerily replied when I alerted her to this dangerous possibility).

But perhaps the most extreme instance of disassociation lies in the fact that the highest officials in the church and the executors of Hubbard's estate are posing more or less incognito as an entertainment-cum-literary agency in Los Angeles called Author Services. When I asked Author Services if they represent more than just one "entertainer," namely L. Ron Hubbard, they told me they have "clients all over the world."

On further investigation, however, I discovered that "Clients all over the world" meant L. Ron Hubbard and the authors in the Writers of the Future series.

The Scientologists are not only gifted peddlers of their own books but wily saboteurs of others', snarling in litigation books by turncoats who rat on Hubbard and spill the church's beans.

In 1987, Bridge tried to block the publication of Corydon's book on the grounds that it's publisher, Lyle Stuart, had stolen its cover illustration, a volcano spewing a technicolor plume of smoke and debris, from *Dianetics*. More recently, Henry Holt has been a victim of New Era Publications, one of the overseas chapters of Hubbard's publishing empire, which has succeeded in stalling for more than a year the distribution of Russell Miller's *Barre-faced Messiah: The True Story of L. Ron Hubbard* on the grounds that Miller violated New Era's copyright when he quoted Hubbard's unpublished letters and early diaries.

And the news is just out that the Scientologists are reportedly preparing to fight another Lyle Stuart book, *A Piece of Blue Sky: Scientology, Dianetics and L. Ron Hubbard Exposed* by a backslider named Jon Atack. The title comes from a statement Hubbard made in 1950, just as his followers were beginning to fold neatly into lockstep with his ambitions — "We've got to sell these people a piece of blue sky," he was reported as saying. And certainly he took a lion's share, a broad swath of the Milky Way, netting at least \$200 million for his own use out of the spoils of his religion.

Daniel Harris writes regularly about books for *The Post*.