

A Study On Book Blurbs: Quest For A New Tool As Well As A New Record For The Library

Dr. Biswajit Adhikary

Librarian, Raja Narendra Lal Khan Women's College (Autonomous), Midnapore, West
Bengal, India.

Abstract:

During last few decades blurb has become an inevitable part of any published documents. Blurb is a small piece of text which provides a short description of a book, film, or other artistic creation, written mainly for promotional purposes. This paper is concerned only with the blurb of books. The paper tries to check if there are any other utilities of the blurb beyond its commercial target. It tries to discuss the relation between the blurb and the reader and the relation between the blurb and the librarian. The paper concludes with the comment that the blurb can be regarded as a very useful tool for the libraries. It also suggests that there must be some standard for the blurb to maintain its quality and reliability.

Keywords: Book-blurb, Library management, Library Catalogue, New arrival, Blurb index, Blurb booklet, Blurb exhibition, MARC, ISBD(G).

Introduction

Before starting the discussion, let's have some examples of blurb of some famous books.

1. 'Set in the Gulf Stream off the coast of Havana, Hemingway's magnificent fable is the story of an old man, a young boy and a giant fish. In a perfectly crafted story, which won for Hemingway the Nobel Prize for Literature, is a unique and timeless vision of the beauty and grief of man's challenge to the elements in which he lives.'

The quotation above is one of the pieces of text printed on the back cover of the book "The Old Man and the Sea" by Hemingway (ISBN 9780099273967).

2. 'It's the most magical book I ever read. Marquez has influenced the World'—Carolina Herrera
3. 'Should be required reading for the entire human race'—The New York Times
4. 'Enormously, Kaleidoscopically, mysteriously alive'—Guardian

The three sentences quoted above are printed as blurb at the back cover of the book "One Hundred Years of Solitude" by Marquez (ISBN 9780140157512).

5. 'A masterpiece, utterly exceptional in every way'—Harpers and Queen
6. 'It is rare to find a book that so effectively cuts through the clothes of nationality, caste and religion to reveal the bare bones of humanity.'—Daily Telegraph

These sentences are used as the blurb of the book "God of Small Things" by Arundhati Roy (ISBN 9789794614020)

So, we have seen from the examples that the blurb promotes a book. Blurb indicates the subject matter, the theme, or the basic storyline of the book. It provides a brief introduction about the book, the author, or the current edition. It has been seen that a large number of readers like to turn the book to see the back cover immediately after watching the front cover. It is mainly because to check the blurb of the book. Blurb helps the reader to get a primary conception of the book.

Blurb is likely to be the first piece of text of a book which the reader read. It acts as the gateway for the reader to enter inside the core area of a book. Blurb guides a reader towards his or her desired book, or, in other words, it takes a book to the hands of its prospective reader. As we cannot imagine a book without a cover, in recent times we cannot imagine a cover without a blurb. A blurb can be described as a bridge constructed by the publisher to connect the author to his reader.

So far, nothing is written by scholars and intellectuals on the term blurb from the perspectives of the Library or Library Science. In this paper, we will try to check if there are any opportunities to utilize the book blurb as a tool of the libraries.

Blurb

The age of this particular term is one hundred fourteen years; however, the notion is more than a one and half-century old. Though the word blurb was used in 1907 for the first time, the first instance of using a blurb with a book goes back to 1856. In 1855, "Leaves of Grass", Walt Whitman's first collection of poetry was published. In response to that, Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote a congratulatory letter including the praise "I greet you at the beginning of a great career" to Whitman. In the second edition of the book, Whitman used these quoted words in the spine, and that was the first blurb of a book ever known.

The word blurb was first coined by American humorist Gelett Burgess (1866–1951) in 1907. There was the announcement "YES, this is a "BLURB"!" at the dust jacket of his book "Are You a Bromide?" A portrait of a young woman shown calling out, namely Miss Belinda Blurb (fictitious) was there, who is described as "in the act of blurbing." From then on, publishers started to think seriously about the nascent term. Burgess defined the term as "a flamboyant advertisement; an inspired testimonial" (Gelett Burgess, 2015).

The online thesaurus of Merriam-Webster lists words like advertisement, announcement, commercial, message, notice, circular, publicity, etc as synonyms and near-synonyms of the word blurb (Merriam-Webster, Blurb, n.d.). It is noteworthy that almost all the words listed by the thesaurus are concerned about the promotional purpose. Now let's have some definitions from renowned sources to check if there is any broader meaning of blurb or not.

"A blurb is a short promotional piece accompanying a piece of creative work. It may be written by the author or publisher or quote praise from others. Blurbs were originally printed on the back or rear dust jacket of a book and are now found on web portals and news websites" (Blurb, 2020).

The online dictionary of Merriam-Webster defines blurb as "a short publicity notice (as on a book jacket)". (Merriam-Webster, Blurb, n.d.)

Blurb is defined by the Compact Oxford English Dictionary as "a short description written to promote a book, film, or other product", (Soanes & Hawker, 2016).

So, from the definitions above we can retrieve the following attributes of the blurb:

- It is generally printed on the flap or back cover of the dust jacket of a book.
- It is a short piece of text with a promotional purpose.
- It provides a short description of a book.
- It generally introduces a book; however, it may sometimes introduce the author too.
- It can be written by the publisher, the author, a professional, or by any person, magazine, establishment from outside.
- It may be an original piece of text written exclusively as a blurb. Sometimes, it may be a quotation from a large text like a review or an essay.
- It can play multiple roles simultaneously. A good blurb is an advertisement for the publisher, a message from the author, and a brief introduction of the book for the readers.

Recipe of the Blurb

Nowadays, blurb (informal) or blurb writing is a respectable job. As the companies spend lots of money to prepare the tagline (e.g., "I'm Lovin' It" of McDonald) for their product, the publishers appoint experts to write the blurb for their books against handsome salaries. The professionals are called, again with an informal word, blurb writer. And it is proved that the blurbs have been very effective to promote books or attracting readers over years. Now, to have a better understanding of the characteristics of the blurb let's have a look at its recipe.

Charles L. Swick in his article "The Book Blurb", describes blurb writing as "giving an attractive resume of the novel without telling too much of the story". We get some points about the blurb from Swick's article. Those are:

- The author may write a short description of his book, but that must be revised by the advertising company to prepare the blurb.
- A quotation from a person of prominence who has read the book may be inscribed as the blurb.
- "Whether it tells much or little, the blurb must make the book sound interesting."
- In the case of a nonfiction book, usually, the foreword and the first and last chapters contain statements that should set the tone of the blurb.
- Only points that seem likely to sell the book should be mentioned.
- The blurb writer must stick to his business to describe the book and not to write his little essay.

The "Editpage" (editpage.com) prescribes five important tips to write a good blurb, which are described as the five "S". Those are – i) Simple, ii) Short, iii) Samples, iv) Story and v) Selling points. The most important features of a blurb are: it must be simple and it must be short. It must be written in simple and lucid language so that all types of readers can easily

comprehend it. And the blurber must be cautious about the length of the blurb; it should not be too long. It has been suggested that before writing the blurb the blurber should look through as many blurb samples as he or she can which provide necessary guidance. Blurb may tell the storyline but not the full story. It has to boost up the interest of the reader in the story. And finally, the blurb must highlight the selling points. After all, the main objective of the blurb is to promote the book.

Blurb and the Reader

People don't like to be called a blurb-reader, because it is slang. Blurb-reader read nothing of a book but the blurb and based on the blurb they try to have an idea about the book. They present themselves in a friend circle or family gatherings as a voracious reader and make expert comments. Blurb-reader may not be an honourable person; however, we must remember that blurb reading is a good practice.

By birth, man inherits a rich collection of great books. Besides, the number of good books is increasing day by day incessantly. However, in a limited lifespan, a man can only read a limited number of books. Therefore, a reader must be very choosy. The book blurb can be a useful indicator for a reader in this respect. It can help to select his or her desired books and to prepare own reading list. Blurb helps to select a title among several titles dealing with the same subject or topic. Also, it assists to eliminate titles which do not belong to the area of interest of a particular reader.

Moreover, even if we overlook its utilities a blurb may be a good read for us. A good blurb may be an independent and attractive text due to its literary value. It may act as the appetiser for a reader before the main course. It may discover the latent interest of a reader which the reader was unaware of. The blurb can modify the choice of a reader and can help to be a better reader,

Blurb: Responsibilities and Opportunities

We have seen that the blurb was initiated almost like an advertisement to promote the book. However, over the years the notion of blurb gains broader meaning and significance. Though blurb is primarily the publisher's scheme, there are other peoples too who are concerned about it. Blurb is written to serve the purpose of commerce, but after being published it becomes a part of knowledge. As the significance of the blurb has been increased, it must have some responsibilities too. There are some basic differences between an advertisement and a blurb. We cannot keep a tagline of cold drinks with the blurb of a book in the same row. Because the tagline is made for a consumer product and the blurb is associated with the book (or some other artistic creation). As the books are the career of knowledge, the blurb should not tell the lies. It must have some reliability, and the blurber must be ethical in writing the blurb. And yes, without any hesitation, based on its performance during last one and half-century, we can say that the blurb is reliable. It was originated for commerce, but it did not do only the commerce.

We cannot imagine a book without a blurb that is published in New York or London or Singapore. But even in the first decade of this century, the word was not so familiar to the authors and readers of Bangla books. In the decades of eighties and nineties of the last century only a few publishers of College Street were aware of the significance of blurb. They used to

print some text at the back cover or on the dust jacket as the blurb, generally written by the author himself. In the last ten or fifteen years, the scenario changed considerably. A bunch of new publishers entered the Bangla Book industry with modern ideas. The printing, binding, and overall getup of Bangla books has been improved. Though the number of the reader was decreasing in a rapid pace the books published from College Street were becoming more and more smart and beautiful over years. And along with the modernisation of the production process blurb has become a very important part of books. Now almost all the leading publishers are seriously thinking about the blurb. And in recent times, the blurb becomes an integral part of the book in Kolkata too.

Blurb and the Library

As the books are the soul of a library, how the library can remain unconcerned about a blurb? For decades, maybe unconsciously, the libraries have been using blurb as a notice addressed to the readers. It has been a very common practice to display the dust jackets as an exhibition of newly arrived books. By this exhibition, the library wants to display the title, the author, and the attractive cover page of any book. And in this process, the blurb also gets displayed. The name of the author, no matter how famous the name is, and the name of the book cannot satisfy a reader. He or she is eager to know something more about the newly accessioned book. The blurb acts as a tiny window for the reader to peep into the interior of the book. Even a few decades back blurb was a technical term of the publishing industry. Nevertheless, the reader and the librarian were acquainted with the blurb without knowing the name.

Now let's look at how the blurb can be useful for the library and the reader.

1. Book selection

For the staff of the acquisition section of the library, the blurb can be a very handy tool. This can help to select the title from several titles dealing with almost same topic. Besides, it can also help to eliminate inferior titles. The library can provide copy of blurbs to the book selection committee, which can help them to prepare the purchase suggestion. Some of the leading publishers have already started to add the blurbs of selected books in their catalogue. Those are very handy documents for the library.

2. New Arrival

As said earlier, through the display of the dust jacket of the newly arrived books on the notice board the libraries unknowingly initiated the practice to exhibit the blurb. So far, such displays are limited on one or two notice boards. However, if the library authority can manage to use an entire wall for this purpose, then that will be a bonus for the enthusiastic readers. The walls of the Reading room or the walls of the staircase would be suitable for such display.

3. Blurb Index

The library can compile a yearly blurb index of selected books and distribute it freely among the readers. This will be beneficial for the scholars and researchers. That will help readers to prepare their reading list for any particular assignments or curriculum. And, it would also boost up the general reading habits of the library users.

4. Blurb Booklet

The library can compile separate Blurb Booklet for different sections e.g., Classic Books, Rare Books, General books, popular books, new books, etc. That will act as an advertisement for the library and will attract new users from different sections of society. Such a booklet will be more helpful for the reader than the simple bibliography or the book catalogue.

5. Blurb in Cataloguing

If the blurb is considered reliable as an indicator of the subject matter of any book, it can be added to the catalogue. Firstly, we can insert it as an extra bibliographical note. We get the theoretical support from the General International Standard Bibliographic Description. The ISBD(G) specifies the note as follows:

"The note area contains any descriptive information that has not been given in other areas of the description but that is considered to be important to users of bibliographic records. Notes qualify and amplify the formal description and can deal with any aspect of a resource. Notes may also give the bibliographic history of the resource and indicate relationships to other resources" (ISBD(G): General International Standard Bibliographic Description, 2004).

So, we can add any selected portion or the full text of the blurb at the 5XX tag of MARC. If the publisher converts the text of the blurb into a QR code and prints it on the back cover (like CIP) then it will be very easy to input in the catalogue. Publishers have to take the responsibility in this regard for the sake of the libraries.

Secondly, we can also add it through an external web link at the field of 856 of MARC. The field is defined as "Information needed to locate and access an electronic resource. The field may be used in a bibliographic record for a resource when that resource or a subset of it is available electronically. In addition, it may be used to locate and access an electronic version of a non-electronic resource described in the bibliographic record or a related electronic resource" (856 - Electronic Location and Access (R)). Usually, the web link of contents, etc. is placed here. Blurb generally indicates the containing subject matter; therefore, it can also be added. In that case, the publisher must provide the web link of the blurb.

6. Blurb exhibition

Besides the book exhibition, the library can organise a blurb exhibition, at least once a year. For the purpose, they can design cards containing blurb along with the name of author and title. The cards should be arranged in classified order. It has been said earlier that blurb has its literary value. Therefore, it can be read independently. Yes, such an exhibition may encourage the blurb-reader. Still, it will be a very good event for the user of the library. And we should not forget that a blurb-reader is better than a non-reader.

Blurb and the Librarian

There is an English idiom, "don't judge a book by its cover". However, sometimes the librarian is bound to judge some books by their cover. The flow of books towards the library is incessant, and the librarian(s) is a melancholy animal witnessing the stream of knowledge. He or she neither has the capabilities to dive deep into the knowledge nor has the liberty to leave the shore. Librarian is assigned to be present all day long to welcome the glorious flow, and to decide for accommodation. Besides all the duties, sometimes he or she faces questions like "is this book helpful for me", "is there any book of my interest", "what are the titles the library possess containing any particular subject", etc. To answer these questions the librarians must judge some books by their cover. The blurb acts as a good friend of them in this regard.

Reading can transform a good librarian into a great librarian. And the practice of reading blurbs can transform an ordinary librarian into a good librarian. It is said that the librarian must possess knowledge with great extension and with the least possible intensity. To gain such knowledge librarians can try reading blurbs.

Therefore, it can be said that blurb-reading is not at all bad practice for a librarian.

Conclusion

After nearly one and half centuries of initiation, the blurb is still not regarded as an essential record for the library. It has not been recognised yet by the library professionals as a tool. However, from the above discussion, we see that there are opportunities to utilize blurb in various operations of the library. The use of this so far neglected piece of text may make things easier for the librarians.

But there remains a concern about the quality of the blurb. In the publishing industry of Bangla books, the quality of the blurb is still not up to the mark. If we like to make the blurb a significant bibliographic record for the library there must be some standard, which will be followed by all the authors and publishers.

All the optimistic discussion will be meaningful only if the publishers provide blurb of good quality with the books. If the librarians and readers consider the blurb as a reliable record they will be concerned about it. It is the common responsibility of the author, reader, publisher, distributor, librarian to make the blurb a relevant piece of record. The libraries are ready to welcome this new species of metadata.

Bibliography

1. 856 - Electronic Location and Access (R). (n.d.). Retrieved July 2020, from Library of Congress: <https://www.loc.gov/marc/bibliographic/bd856.html>
2. Almond, S. (2003). A few words about blurbs. Retrieved July 2020, from MobyLives: http://www.mobylikes.com/Almond_blurbs.html
3. Blurb. (2020, May). Retrieved July 2020, from Wikipedia: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blurb>
4. Dwyer, C. (2015, September 27). Forget The Book, Have You Read This Irresistible Story On Blurbs? Retrieved July 2020, from NPR:

<https://www.npr.org/2015/09/27/429723002/forget-the-book-have-you-read-this-irresistible-story-on-blurbs>

5. Gelett Burgess. (2015). Retrieved June 22, 2020, from Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gelett_Burgess
6. Hemingway, E. (2000). *The Old Man and the Sea*. London: Vintage Books.
7. ISBD(G): General International Standard Bibliographic Description. (2004). Retrieved July 2020, from IFLA (International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions): <https://archive.ifla.org/VII/s13/pubs/isbdg2004.pdf>
8. Marquez, G. G. (2007). *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. New Delhi: Penguin India.
9. Merriam-Webster. (n.d.). Blurb. Retrieved August 1, 2020, from Merriam-Webster.com thesaurus: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/thesaurus>
10. Roy, A. (2002). *God of small things*. New Delhi: Penguin India.
11. Soanes, C., & Hawker, S. (Eds.). (2016). *Compact Oxford English Dictionary of Current English* (3rd Edition ed.). Delhi: Oxford University Press.
12. Swick, C. L. (1939). The Book Blurb. *The English Journal* , 140-142.
13. The Five “S” of Blurb Writing—5 Awesome Tips. (n.d.). Retrieved July 2020, from Editage: https://www.editage.com/info/book-editing-services/articles/the-five-S-of-blurb-writing-check-these-5-awesome_tips.html