

# SCRATCHPAD

## Book titles and misleading marketing

By ERICK BENGEL  
FOR COAST WEEKEND

When you read the title “Dog Gone: A Lost Pet’s Extraordinary Journey and the Family Who Brought Him Home,” what do you imagine this book is about?

You probably assumed it’s mostly about a dog. Or perhaps you thought the author, Pauls Toutonghi, took a fanciful tour of the canine mindscape à la “Homeward Bound.”

You would be wrong. As Toutonghi and reviewers pointed out, “Dog Gone” is really the family’s story. It’s about the owner (Toutonghi’s mother-in-law) who transcended her traumatic background to raise healthy children and create a stable family of her own — and who, when their dog, “Gonker,” disappeared, went to superhuman lengths to find him.

So why the misleading, albeit mildly clever, title? (Incidentally, I was reminded of

1995’s big lie known as “Far from Home: The Adventures of Yellow Dog,” a movie kids went to see thinking it was about a lost dog only to discover it’s actually about a lost boy and his parents — who, by the way, have a yellow dog.)

Toutonghi — an Oregon author who teaches at Lewis & Clark College — explained at a recent book reading in Manzanita that, if he’d had his way, the book would have been named “True North.” “I didn’t think this (book)

was about Gonker,” he said. “And I actually think that that’s part of why I don’t like the title very much, because I felt like that was sort of a miscasting of it.”

But he didn’t have his way; Penguin Random House had theirs.

This misalignment between substance and sales strategy is pretty common. Molly Gloss, author of “Falling from Horses,” said during this year’s Get Lit at the Beach panel in Cannon Beach that she wanted to name her

novel “Rough Cut.” Booksellers, however, wanted to tie it to her previous book “The Hearts of Horses.”

Authors, it turns out, don’t have nearly as much creative control over presentation minutia, like titles, as readers might think.

Having named it, Toutonghi’s publishers heavily marketed “Dog Gone” as a pet book, to be shelved in Barnes & Noble’s pet section.


“They wanted to sell the book a certain way, and I don’t know that it was the

best way to sell it,” Toutonghi said. “That was my feeling.”

The complex infrastructure of book sales is largely invisible to the public — and to writers, he noted.

“That ends up really, in a lot of invisible ways, controlling the market, and controlling the books that we access as readers, and controlling the books that writers get to publish,” Toutonghi said.

Amazon, for example, bent on moving as many units as possible, often dictates covers, titles, “or even, arguably, deeper,” Toutonghi said.

All the more reason, he advised, to buy your books from your local bookseller. 

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**COAST WEEKEND EDITOR**  
ERICK BENGEL

**CALENDAR COORDINATOR**  
REBECCA HERREN

**CONTRIBUTORS**  
JANAE EASLON  
DON FRADES  
RYAN HUME  
R.J. MARX  
NANCY McCARTHY  
BARBARA LLOYD McMICHAEL  
ANDREW TONRY  
PATRICK WEBB

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New items for publication consideration must be submitted by 10 a.m. Tuesday, one week and two days before publication.

**TO SUBMIT AN ITEM**  
**Phone:** 503.325.3211 Ext. 217 or 800.781.3211  
**Fax:** 503.325.6573  
**E-mail:** editor@coastweekend.com  
**Address:** P.O.Box 210 • 949 Exchange St. Astoria, OR 97103

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