

The (Book) Party of Glenn Beck

Spending an evening with Glenn Beck—and the people who love to read him.

Most people associate Glenn Beck, the pudgy, weepy avatar for all that is wrong (or right) in America, with his syndicated radio show or his Fox News TV program. But Beck's biggest successes have come as an author. Rush Limbaugh and Sean Hannity still get more listeners than Beck; Bill O'Reilly and Hannity still get more viewers. But no one—not Hannity, not O'Reilly, not Jon Stewart, not even Sarah Palin—has dominated the publishing industry as completely and comprehensively as Glenn Beck.

And this explains how, last Thursday, I found myself sitting in a sold-out Branford, Conn., movie theater, waiting for the start of Beck's *Broke: Restarting the Engine of America*. That night, Beck was promoting his newest book, also titled *Broke*, at a sold-out, \$90-a-ticket show in Pittsburgh. While Beck's previous six books all hit number one on the *New York Times* best-seller list, *Broke* debuted at number 2, behind Keith Richards's new memoir. With Beck's books, though, the sales tell only part of the story. Beck has leveraged the idea of authorship in all sorts of innovative and lucrative ways. In fact, *Broke* (the book event) was being broadcast not only in Branford's movie theater, but in 536 more around the country—and for \$20 a ticket.

Those aren't author numbers. Those are Bon Jovi numbers, Celine Dion numbers, Metropolitan Opera numbers—all of whom have done successful simulcasts of their concerts. Hell, those are Rolling Stones numbers.

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Conservative book publishing first took off in the 1990s. One early mega-hit was Rush Limbaugh's *The Way Things Ought to Be* (1992). But Beck has adapted to changes in the publishing industry—for example, the rise of non-book stores like Wal-Mart and Costco—better than anyone else on the right. Like Limbaugh, Beck comes with an ideal “platform” for selling books; his media outlets, according to *Forbes*, earned him \$32 million from June 2009 to June 2010. But in that same period, Beck made more from publishing—\$13 million—than from any other part of his media empire.

That number reflects Beck's growing popularity. His first book, *The Real America* (2003), sold 50,000 hardcovers; his second, *An Inconvenient Book* (2007), sold well over 500,000 hardcovers. But it also reflects Beck's publishing savvy. He's published all of his books with Simon & Schuster and, since it launched in 2005, with its conservative imprint, Threshold. In 2009, though, Beck and his publisher agreed to a new “global multi-book, multi-imprint co-publishing agreement.”

This means, in short, that Beck gave up large advances in exchange for more control and a bigger cut of each book's profits. The agreement—along with his affiliation with a sprawling publisher

like Simon & Schuster, which is itself owned by the CBS Corporation—has allowed Beck to experiment. Beck and his publisher tried out *Glenn Beck's Common Sense* as an ebook original; they toyed with two audiobook originals, *America's March to Socialism* and *Idiots Unplugged*.

Simon & Schuster's size also let Beck diversify. Twice a year, he meets with Simon & Schuster to pitch a dozen or so ideas, and the company has the resources to publish and market any of them. Beck's books have topped an unprecedented four different *New York Times* best-seller lists: *Glenn Beck's Common Sense* ended up on the paperback nonfiction list; *The Christmas Sweater: A Picture Book* on the children's picture book; *The Christmas Sweater* and *The Overton Window* on hardcover fiction; and *Arguing with Idiots* and *An Inconvenient Book* on the hardcover nonfiction.

If that seems like a lot for one author, that's because "Glenn Beck" entails far more than a single person. Beck has never pretended otherwise. His production company, Mercury Radio Arts, employs more than 40 people, including Kevin Balfe, "Senior Vice President for Publishing." Beck supplies each book's ideas and ethos, but a team puts it together. *Arguing with Idiots* credits Beck and Balfe, plus 17 more "writers" and "contributors." The whole process resembles the one behind Jon Stewart's *Daily Show* books—and, just as the copyright to those books belongs, not to Stewart, but to his Busboy Productions, so the copyrights to Beck's books belong to Mercury Radio Arts.

It's no surprise that, in content and style, Beck's nonfiction blockbusters—like *Broke*—come closer to Stewart's miscellanies than to the memoirs and manifestos of most conservative writers. Each Beck book includes snappy illustrations, stylized Beck photo shoots, and lots of infographics and one liners—a mash up of coffee-table and comic book. This doesn't mean Beck replicates Stewart's wit and wisdom. (Not even close.) But it does mean Beck has identified and imported a very successful publishing model.

Beck skeptics love to speculate on whether he's more motivated by cash or convictions. You won't find a clear answer in his publishing practices, but you will see his talent and ambition on display. On his radio show, Beck recently plugged *Broke*: "If you're looking for real meat, real answers, this is it." Beck never stops cross-promoting his products—to the point that it recently got him in trouble with Roger Ailes, his boss at Fox News. (One suspects this would be less of a problem if Beck was signed with HarperCollins, the publisher owned, like Fox News, by Rupert Murdoch.) But Beck's just as eager to synergize with the lefties in publishing. Indeed, one of the more interesting things about Beck is how nice he plays with the liberals, so long as there's money to be made.

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Another interesting thing about Beck: despite the fact that, between his radio and TV shows, there are currently four free hours of Glenn Beck per day, he convinces people to pay for even more access. This "more" includes his magazine (\$34.95 for 10 issues); his Glennbeck.com Insider EXTREME membership (\$9.95 per month); and, of course, his books and book events.

Which brings us back to Branford, where Beck will soon appear, live and in high def. The audience is what you'd expect: middle aged (or a little older) and middle class (or a little lower). Most people arrive in groups, and, even if they don't, they quickly chat up their neighbors. There's lots of popcorn and soft drinks, but it feels less like pre-movie chatter than the small talk before church.

Then the lights go down and Beck bounds on to stage, wearing Converse and an inadvisably snug sweater. The stage also contains two chalkboards; two rows of seated Beck fans, each one holding a copy of *Broke*; and a blue classic Mustang.

The first half of Beck's presentation centers on explaining just how broke America is. The Mustang becomes the evening's controlling metaphor, allowing Beck to touch on everything from American exceptionalism ("It's a classic—there's nothing like it") to the Founding Fathers ("the Constitution was perfect in the show room"). Using the chalkboards and David Buckner, one of his in-house experts, Beck shows that while Greece might seem to be in trouble, California is actually in much worse shape. After one particularly ugly statistic, the entire Branford crowd sucks in its breath—just as Beck looks directly at the camera and says: "Movie theaters across America are about to gasp."

After a 15-minute intermission, Beck returns for the second half, sans sweater. He's promised we'll now turn to some solutions. In fact, that's why those fans have been nervously fidgeting on stage—they're going to help him explain the book's message. But Beck has a change of heart. "I was was going to talk to you guys about *Broke*," he says, "but it's all politics."

Beck barely mentions his book (or those stranded fans) again. There's nothing wrong with this, and Beck is an extraordinary entertainer, oscillating between humor and seriousness like a preacher. His favorite targets remain Woodrow Wilson and other "elites." While caressing the Mustang, he says, in a lisp and to raucous laughter, "Or maybe we want a Leaf?" But the jokes and unfocused tangents (what does Bill Ayers have to do with any of this?) keep Beck from developing any sustained arguments. It's the top-40 DJ in him—except he's not cutting off the traffic guy, but his own ideas.

Still, Beck knows his content matters less than his community. That's how he got this simulcast gig in the first place. Dan Diamond, vice president of Fathom Entertainment, the company that sets up simulcasts for Beck and Bon Jovi et al., told me they approached Beck in 2005. "Glenn was one of the first people who saw what we saw in movie theaters," Diamond said, "that they are a place to galvanize communities." The *Broke* event is actually Beck's sixth with Fathom, and he's the company's only author or political figure.

Community seems an apt way to describe the scene in Branford. Five minutes before Beck comes on, a woman stands up, announces she's with The 9/12ers of Southern Connecticut, and starts passing out info on their bi-weekly book meeting. During the broadcast itself, the Branford audience echoes the cheers and call-and-response of their Pittsburgh brethren. And this togetherness feels like the point. *Broke* comes with twice as many notes and sources as Beck's previous books—during another radio broadcast, Beck hyped the "50 pages of footnotes"—but it

doesn't really matter. Beck's books and book events are for the converted. They're less tracts than catechisms.

Beck's fans love his show's new ending. Improvising at the chalkboard, he suggests that America is working through the five stages of grief. He pivots to the vaguely religious, then talks about his personal redemption. (Here, at last, come the tears.) "I've been rich, and I've been poor," Beck says, building to a larger point about the perils of materialism, though not before making another joke ("Rich is better"). I think back to the beginning of the broadcast, a bit of behind-the-scenes filler where we watch Glenn sit for one of his book's cover shoots. *Broke* calls for a mechanical theme, so Beck goes to a garage and poses in coveralls and with a blow torch. Initially, he holds the blow torch the wrong way, with the head pointed directly at his face. But the Branford audience, a few of whom surely used a blow torch at work today, doesn't seem to mind.