

Book review

# McLuhan bio answers question

By ALLAN GOULD  
 Marshall McLuhan was one of the major stars of the very media that he helped to define so brilliantly. He was arguably the most internationally famous Canadian of the 1960s - and that includes Gordon Lightfoot, Anne Murray and possibly even Pierre Trudeau. For that reason alone, although there are countless other good reasons, a fine new biography by the excellent Philip Marchand is extremely welcome (Marshall McLuhan - The Medium and the Messenger, Random House, 320 pages, \$24.95).

Marchand is a superior stylist with a solid academic background, and his many years as a successful journalist have only helped him to write a highly readable, pleasurable, intelligent study of a most remarkable human being and consciousness-raiser.

The fame that McLuhan achieved during his too-brief lifetime is undeniable. He died shortly before the three-score-and-ten (70) mentioned in the Bible he loved so dearly.

At one point in the 1960s, his name would regularly pop up in New Yorker cartoons as frequently as on best-seller lists. The expression "Marshall McLuhan, what are ya doin'?" was considered a witicism across much of North America. And McLuhan was even tagged by filmmaker Woody Allen for a walk-on - as himself, naturally - in Allen's Academy Award-winning film, Annie Hall. Hardly the kind of international awareness one would expect for a lad of the Canadian prairies!

Marchand is more than satisfactory on the future media-guru's youth in Edmonton: the influence of 1920s' pop psychology; McLuhan's passion for words (he would memorize the most obscure from the Oxford English Dictionary); his unease with mechanical things; the failure of his parents' marriage; the positive influence of the Great Depression (no need to go job-hunting!); the effect of such writers as Chesterton on McLuhan's eventual conversion to Roman Catholicism, which would so influence his entire life and thoughts; his hatred for both Marxism and capitalism; his move to Cambridge to study, where he not only learned to love T.S. Elliot, but even gained a respect for advertising!

PERSONAL INTERVIEWS

But unlike the previous paragraph, Marchand does no listing of key events in his book. He draws deeply from dozens of per-

sonal interviews, as well as McLuhan's diaries. Marchand enriches the mix with such crucial insights as these: "McLuhan felt that his upbringing on the prairies provided him with a kind of natural 'counter-environment' to the great centres of civilization. He felt he had the advantage that any bright outsider brings with him from the boondocks when he comes to the big city: a freshness of outlook that often enables him to see overall patterns missed by the inhabitants who have been moulded by those patterns."

Right on. And it was McLuhan's ability to find patterns in our mass media that so changed his life and, very possibly, the way that one-billion-plus people look at those media in the last quarter of the 20th century.

McLuhan's incredible energy, his astonishing articulateness, the way his mind worked so remarkably quickly and comet-like, are captured in this exquisitely written biography.

Marchand is keen in his tracking down of the countless influences on McLuhan's thought, from the well-known one of Harold Innes at the University of Toronto, to an obscure Jesuit student, Walter Ong, whose M.A. thesis "hit upon the basic notion underlying (McLuhan's seminal book) The Gutenberg Galaxy, namely that Western culture in the Renaissance had shifted from a primarily auditory mode of apprehending reality to a primarily visual mode and that the vehicle for this shift was the invention of printing."

McLuhan the man doesn't always smell as sweet in this book. The descriptions of his exasperation with his children; his reading the Bible aloud to them at four in the morning; his purported anti-homosexual and anti-feminist feelings; his near-paranoia about Freemasons and others; his petty tensions with other professors at the University of Toronto; his inability to complete most projects that he began, all add up to an uncomfortable portrait of an obviously brilliant but occasionally grotesque man.

SHAKEN

Still, who cannot be shaken to read of McLuhan's "startlingly prescient suggestion (in 1966!)... for the manufacture and sale of taped movies for replay on television sets." The VCR, two decades early! Who cannot be appreciative of Marchand's marvelously clear description of McLuhan's views of radio and TV? ("McLuhan observ-

ed that Hitler was made by radio and would have been undone by television. The remark touched a nerve with many left-wing commentators, who seized on it as proof of McLuhan's frivolous approach to things) yet it is an entirely accurate and perceptive remark. Radio excited people because it stimulated the ear, that emotive organ, and encouraged fantasy; television, on the other hand, held people in the grip of a profound involvement with its electronic dots, an involvement that could easily be mistaken for passivity and even mental vacancy.")

This book is a must for all students of the media, and for anyone interested in this most profound thinker - whatever his failings in scholarship, and the weakness of his several "non-books." The real disappointment is that Marchand did not speak with McLuhan's widow or any of the six McLuhan children. And to not quote from his close friend and agent, Matie Molinaro, is as inexcusable as writing a book on Fitzgerald and not mentioning Maxwell Perkins. And so, a strong suggestion: Read this book, but augment it with the crucial Letters of Marshall McLuhan, gathered by his widow, agent, and William Toye, and published by Oxford. Together, you'll finally have everything you need to know - other than McLuhan's books, themselves.

-Allan Gould is a Toronto-based journalist and author, whose latest book is a work of political satire, The Great Wiped Out North.

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# Boating accidents rise

Statistics show that one out of two Ontarians will be involved with boating this year. With that in mind, the Ontario Provincial Police has prepared information designed to alert the public to dangers related to boating.

Last year, fatalities were up, with 64 killed compared to 43 in 1987. Approximately half of fatal accidents are alcohol-related.

"Alcohol consumption is more hazardous on a small boat than on shore," said S/Sgt. Larry Smith. "It throws off coordination, balance and judgement, which are very important factors in safe boating."

Eighty-five per cent of those killed were not wearing life jackets.

"Life jackets won't work if you don't wear them," said S/Sgt. Smith. "It is difficult even for a

good swimmer to locate a jacket and put it on after capsizing."

Hypothermia is another dangerous factor that should be considered. Most lakes have an average temperature of two degrees Celsius in May, and at that temperature, life expectancy can be measured in seconds.

"Cold water chills 25 times faster than cold air. If your boat capsizes, you should try to get as much of your body out of the water and onto the boat as you can. Of course, you should also dress warmly for this kind of weather. Even though the air may feel warm, the water isn't," said S/Sgt. Smith.

More than three-quarters of the fatal accidents that occurred last year could have been prevented if boaters had respected basic safety rules and used proper safety equipment, according to S/Sgt. Smith.



## fabric forum

Prepared as a consumer education service by the International Fabricare Institute

### Seeing spots before your eyes?

It is important to take care of a spot on your clothing as soon as possible. There are several things you can do to help your dry-cleaner do a better job of stain removal. Never put away a garment with spills or stains on it. The warmth of a closet as well as exposure to artificial or natural light can help set a stain. Never rub a stain. Blot the soiled area. Inform your



drycleaner of the location of specific stains even if the stains are no longer visible. Stains that appear invisible can "oxidize" and show up later.



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### ASK KATHY

Dear Kathy

The other day I was shopping with a neighbor who almost compulsively reads labels on packaging. I looked at a few labels, but didn't really know what I was looking for. Can you be of some help?

Reply:

The content labels you refer to on food packaging will indeed tell you a lot about the product. Ingredients are listed by quantity included in the product. So if a product lists sugar as the first ingredient, you know that there is more sugar in the product than anything else. On the other hand, if sugar is way down the list, or not included at all, you'll know that the product contains little or no sugar.

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KATHY HAJAS  
 Diet Center Counselor

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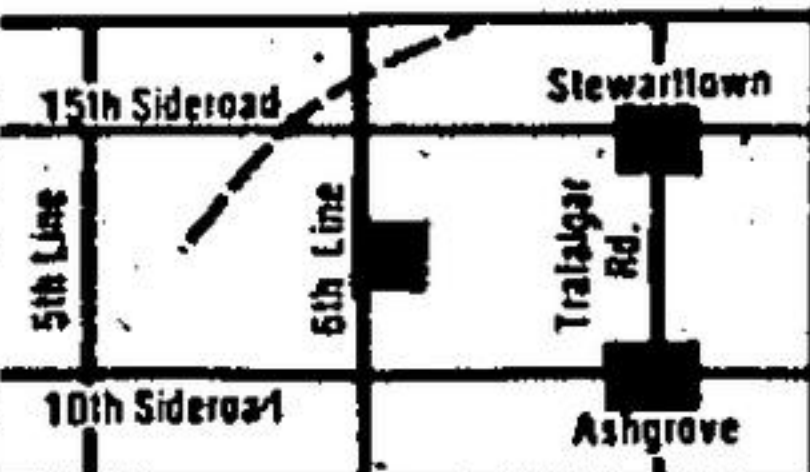


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