Book Review:

Selling the Silver Bullet: The Lone Ranger and Transmedia Brand Licensing

Santo, Avi
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In his book *Selling the Silver Bullet*, Avi Santo traces the eighty-year history of the marketing of the iconic Western adventure serial *The Lone Ranger*, from its beginnings as an independently produced, regionally broadcast syndicated radio program in 1933, through its prominence in early network television in the 1950s, to its legacy as a heritage brand struggling to remain relevant. Santo's focus is on the licensing of entertainment media and intellectual property (IP) management as a site of cultural labor. He details the ingenious marketing efforts of corporate manager George W. Trendle and his firm, Lone Ranger International (LRI), to expand The Lone Ranger brand's reach.

LRI crafted plans for local radio station managers to link the program with complementary corporate sponsorships and countless numbers of consumer product tie-ins, including campaigns with local bakeries, a nationwide Lone Ranger Safety Club that reinforced young listeners' attachment to their masked hero, and ongoing promotions with cereal manufacturers. The ultimate value of The Lone Ranger for its creators, Santo argues, was not the radio production itself as text, but instead the possibilities the character could generate for created licensed ancillary products, which could push the character into many corners of fans' social and imaginative lives.

In addition to chronicling The Lone Ranger and its many offspring, Santo argues that there are precedents for the intensive cross-media brand development and IP marketing campaigns that became so prominent with blockbuster films in the late 1970s. Thus, he charts development of the brand management of iconic entertainment characters, exploring how changing

economic, industrial, and legal and cultural conditions across the century shaped licensing and merchandizing of popular IPs.

He also shows how the owners of IP have historically experimented with character licensing to expand the footprint of their entertainment brands without having to do all the heavy lifting of investing and manufacturing themselves. Promotions and giveaways that tie an iconic character to another consumer product (such as breakfast cereals or McDonalds Happy Meals) can offer a win-win scenario to economic partners, earning money and further exposure in popular culture for the character's IP owners, and shining new attention on the quotidian cereal or McNugget by associating a beloved icon with a built-in fan base.

Santo provides an intriguing history of the struggles between original authors and corporate rights holders for control over IP early in the twentieth century. He shows how similar media products/brands of the day—cartoon characters originally appearing in newspaper comic strips such as the Brownies, Yellow Kid, Little Orphan Annie, and Popeye—were moved across media platforms as content and characters and licensed for promotional tie-ins and brand extensions. Santo demonstrates how corporate authority gained ground over individual artists' control.

This book contributes to the scholarship of legal studies surrounding entertainment product copyright issues, building on the work of Lawrence Lessig and Jane Gaines. It explores precursors to the paratexts, transmedia narratives, and associated products that fill today's media worlds as studied by Jonathan Grey and Derek Johnson. It demonstrates how a smaller brand (even one challenged by limitations of the characters and narrative) innovatively prospered through diligent work of IP management. The book's strength is the enormous amount of primary source research incorporated into the study, including fascinating details of the business of character licensing—the breadth of licensed products, details of how much they earned, the contentious legal battles over authorship, and in Clayton Moore's case, the right to represent the iconic role off screen. The author teases out many issues regarding the cultural analysis of these struggles over “maintaining authority over a property's core values and markets amid changing economic, industrial, legal, technological and cultural conditions.”

The book is at its strongest in its discussion of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, when character licensor LRI acted as brand manager, from its start in the 1930s as a semiautonomous negotiator of local and regional events and products stemming from syndicated radio show, to its integration within increasingly larger media corporations as *The Lone Ranger* program moved into national distribution through television in the late 1940s and 1950s. The character became less important as the entire pantheon of Western heroes lost traction in the 1960s. Then *The Lone Ranger* became a legacy brand, and Santo describes the many difficulties that the licensor faced trying to keep the brand vibrant amid turbulent cultural times and competition from many new rivals. Santo charts LRI's further incorporation into conglomerates; today, it is a speck in the Dream Works Entertainment Dream Works Classics portfolio. The brand was perhaps fatally undone by negative reactions to the 2013 eponymous film.

There are challenges in focusing analysis so doggedly on *The Lone Ranger*. Although the program's main character had strongly defined moral attributes, the formulaic nature of the show's plots, paucity of additional regular characters besides Tonto and Silver, and its

setting in the post-Civil War Old West substantially narrowed the range of narratives the show could tell. Occasionally, the focus leads Santo to overstate his arguments in claiming that the efforts of IP licensors in this era equaled a loosely organized industry built around character branding in consumer product merchandizing and extension across media platforms. The dozens of stories of individual artists and corporations expanding their media brands and building product-licensing empires are fascinating, but without further discussion of the Walt Disney Company's efforts, the overarching analysis of the industry remains inconclusive.

Selling the Silver Bullet is a valuable study on many levels: it provides an intriguing history of independently produced, syndicated regional radio production in the 1930s and 1940s, and early television programming in the late 1940s and 1950s. Its history of character licensing, and the legal struggles this engendered, is fascinating. Potential for historical fan studies is also raised, as researchers might investigate how boys and girls "played" inside The Lone Ranger universe in what Santo terms "immersive world building experiences" looking for scraps of evidence where fans incorporated the heroic masked man, Tonto, and Silver into their leisure-time play, scrapbooks, school assignments, autobiographical memories.

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