

"A boozy, breezy free fall through the magazine industry's fading days of glory.... Take 'Mad Men,' add 40 years, and you'd get these Mag Men."

— Tom Rock, *Newsday*

THE LAST THUNK

GERARD FARRELL

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THUNK! It's the sweet sound an ad-packed magazine makes when it's dropped on a table. At glitzy Carlyle Nash Media, it's the sound of success. And star publisher Mitch Blake has been happily hearing it for a decade. But when the heavily hyped debut issue of *World Magazine* gets panned in the press and advertisers start to flee, Mitch must control the damage. Can he right the ship and protect his reputation? Or will both be sunk by Paul Cavanaugh, a hard-drinking, paranoid, stress-prone staffer who has stolen an item Mitch needs back to avert disaster: a miniature beach ball.

One part pre-recession satire, one part diary of a marketing man coming undone, *The Last Thunk* is a story of betrayal and friendship, love and survival in the crazy, gritty, glamorous world of magazine advertising... as told by the beach-ball thief himself.

* * * *

"A BOOZY, BREEZY FREE FALL THROUGH THE MAGAZINE INDUSTRY'S FADING DAYS OF GLORY. *THE LAST THUNK* depicts all the ambition, paranoia, and ethical ambiguity of middle management, and the toll that culture takes on its inhabitants. Take 'Mad Men,' add 40 years, and you'd get these Mag Men who are captured so vividly by Farrell's four-color glossy writing. ***THUNK*** reverberates."

—Tom Rock, *Newsday*, author of *Game Seven*

"THIS IS A TERRIFIC BOOK—FAST-PACED, HILARIOUS, and so jam-packed with genuine insider dish your eyes will pop. I couldn't put it down!"

—Gwen Cooper, author of *Homer's Odyssey*

"A FAST-PACED, WICKEDLY FUNNY ROMP from a writer who has been through the wringer of the magazine world."

—Charles Salzberg, author of *Second Story Man*

* * * *

Gerard Farrell has worked in the magazine industry since the late '90s for brands including *The New Yorker*, *Rolling Stone*, *Allure*, and the ill-fated business magazine *Condé Nast Portfolio*. His short humor has appeared in the literary anthology *The Man Who Ate His Book*, and he is a frequent contributor to the literary webzine *Ducts*. He lives in Farmingdale, NY with his wife, Maricel, and their three children.



Photo: Conor Farrell



US \$20.00

The Last Thunk by Gerard Farrell
ggfarrell.com

GREENPOINT PRESS
A division of New York Writers Resources
greenpointpress.org

Book Design: Robert L. Lascaro



THE LAST
THUNK

A Novel

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GREENPOINT PRESS
NEW YORK, NY

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ISBN 978-0-9906194-7-5

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Book Designer: Robert L. Lascaro
LascaroDesign.com

Greenpoint Press
A division of New York Writers Resources
greenpointpress.org
200 Riverside Boulevard, Suite 32E
New York, NY 10069

New York Writers Resources:
· newyorkwritersresources.com
· newyorkwritersworkshop.com
· greenpointpress.org
· prisonwrites.org

Printed in the United States
on acid-free paper

To Maricel. For everything.

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“One of the symptoms of approaching nervous breakdown is the belief that one’s work is terribly important”

— Bertrand Russell, *The Conquest of Happiness* (1930)

PART I: 2002-2007

You'll need to be sober for this.

CHAPTER ONE

World Begins

(2007)

I SHOULD HAVE BEEN SATISFIED with Carlyle Nash Media's 2007 holiday schedule: 11 closed-shop days in addition to my four weeks of vacation. But five years with the company had spoiled me.

"Don't we usually get Columbus Day?," I muttered as I ran my finger down the gilded, die-cut calendar. My first impulse was to check last year's schedule, but that would have to wait. I'd just been summoned for a 9:00 AM with Mitch.

Mitch Blake, that is. My boss. He wasn't a fan of the holiday calendar either. But for different reasons. The office was to Mitch what a spa or a pub is to a human. It was the place he wanted to be over any other. And he seemed surprised when people felt differently. If you asked Mitch to approve you for a long weekend, you'd get the same question each time.

"Oh. Weren't you just on vacation?" he'd say while paging back through his leather-bound planner.

"Ummm, no Mitch. It's actually been a while. There was the oral surgery last year, and that one day in February when my cat—"

“Fine. Just make sure I can reach you.”

But Mitch—star publisher with a string of ad-sales resurrections at magazines such as *True Gent*, *Fine Estates*, and *Bellwether* to his name—had recently begun to see the value of a day off. Not for himself, but for the overburdened staff of his latest project, Carlyle Nash’s most important launch ever: *World Magazine*.

Nearly two years in the making, *World* was to be a general-interest title so wide in scope that we had budget for embedded war reporters in the Horn of Africa, dueling beat writers in Silicon Valley, and even a Royal Family correspondent. On the ad side, our sales reps could expense everything from three-hour client lunches at Per Se to charter jet rentals. When Alec Baldwin narrated our 90-second promotional video, he told the director, “I haven’t been paid this much since *The Hunt for Red October*.”

Salaries were generous too, but in the heat of the pre-launch stage, we on the business staff would have gladly traded them for a day off. Everyone had been pushed hard. What had once been a place of pleasant hallway greetings was becoming one of passing eye rolls that screamed, “Can you believe this shit?”

So with eight weeks to go before the ad deadline for May’s premiere issue, Mitch dangled a carrot: if we could bring in 30 more ad pages, to shatter the Carlyle Nash single-issue record of 189, everyone would get the day off on the Tuesday after Memorial Day. Mitch had at long last taken the pulse of the office and now knew what we needed to hear: *four-day weekend*. Our sales staff responded.

Jim Keane closed a four-page Mercedes unit within a day of the announcement. The Chicago office locked down an eight-page advertorial from Dow Chemical. Detroit delivered Ford F-150 and Skoal. Fist bumps made a return.

In four short weeks, the *World* premiere issue hit its 190 ad-page goal. Equally jammed with editorial features on everyone and everything from Lance Armstrong to Lehman Brothers, biowarfare to Beyoncé, the inch-thick debut would make that sweet *thunk* when dropped on a table. To Mitch, it was a sound

as beautiful as his children's laughter. Most important, he had his record—delivering on his promise to Calvin Moreland, Carlyle Nash's octogenarian chairman, to set a new bar.

When I took my seat in front of Mitch's desk, which was handcrafted from ebony and Carpathian Elm, he was on the first of his 30 morning phone calls. As usual, it was to the *New York Tribune's* Lou Lamont, the most influential media columnist in Manhattan. Mitch, a PR virtuoso, had already succeeded in making *World* the most talked-about, anticipated launch ever. With more than a few competitors hoping to see us fail, spreading the news that the premiere issue was *too full to accept more ads* had to be equal parts imperative and intoxicating.

"Lou Lamont...how are you, my friend?"

As he spoke—phone between ear and shoulder—I watched him simultaneously tap out emails and cross items off a to-do list. Unlike most other publishers at Carlyle Nash, who rose to the top of a magazine masthead on raw ambition, Mitch had gotten there on brains, organizational skills, and consummate attention to detail. That he could pass for a champion surfer was the bow on an envy-inducing package. He was six-foot-two, blue-eyed, with close-cropped blond hair, and at the age of 46 he was in the best shape of his life. His wife, Danica, was an inarguable 10—blond too. His adorable pre-teen daughters, blond. If you stared long enough at the sun-splashed family photos on his desk, you'd be transported to Greenwich. Behind him, on a spacious windowsill, sat shots of him with Jon Stewart, Jack Welch, Muhammad Ali, and Katie Couric. Fencing equipment lay in a corner.

"I'm not worried about *The Globalist*," said Mitch. "Evans and that tired old pamphlet can say whatever they want about *World*. They're scared of us, Lou. Don't quote me on that, though. Let me just say..."

He covered the phone.

"What's *The Globalist's* median age on the affluent survey?"

"Fifty-five point four," I answered.

“Median age of fifty-five, Lou. Declining household income too. That’s *The Globalist’s* readership—old, white, and eating out of cans. There’s your quote.”

As Mitch moved on to *World’s* long-term business model, I congratulated myself for knowing the median age off the top of my head. *Be ready*, I had exhorted myself during the walk down the hallway. *Focus*. But with one right answer, I began to relax a bit.

Good job. Way to be prepared. And Mitch knows it. How could he not? He knows. He hired you. And when do you not deliver? You’re doing great. No one can do this job like you. But what is he writing on his pad? Looks like my name. Wait, no, that’s not my name. It’s someone else’s name. Whose? Someone he wants to interview? Why? For a job? What job? Stop it. What the fuck is wrong with you? You’re fine. You’re good.

As I took a long sip of bottled water, Mitch moved on to the standard closing: 30 seconds on Lou’s golf game and 30 on his kids. He tossed a worn pencil in the trash, picked out a freshly sharpened one, and crossed *Lamont* off his list. He flashed me the usual thumbs-up without raising his head. I was free to go.

“You look tired,” said Mitch’s assistant, Naomi, as I passed her desk.

“That’s because I am.”

And I was. My name is Paul Cavanaugh. I served as the marketing director on what many call the industry’s last big launch. To say that *World* changed me for a while would be an understatement. The ill-fated magazine took a lot out of me and a lot away from me.

But I still have something Mitch doesn’t.

* * * *

THE BEACH BALL ARRIVED in my in-box about a month later, not long after the May issue officially launched—on the day Diane left for a Puerto Rico vacation.

About the Author

GERARD FARRELL has worked in the magazine industry since the late '90s for brands including *The New Yorker*, *Rolling Stone*, *Allure*, and the ill-fated business magazine *Condé Nast Portfolio*. His short humor has appeared in the literary anthology *The Man Who Ate His Book*, and he is a frequent contributor to the literary webzine *Ducts*. He is currently working on his second novel, *Tailspin*, the story of a disgraced salesman seeking revenge on the temp who got him fired.



Photo: Conor Farrell

He lives in Farmingdale, NY with his wife, Maricel, their children Conor, Patrick, and Cristina, and Holly the Cat.

To learn more visit: ggfarrell.com