



## Too Pooped to Pop, NOT!

*Slam Dunks and No-Brainers: Language in Your Life, the Media, Business, Politics, and, Like, Whatever*

Leslie Savan, Knopf

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Pop phrases are the high-test fuel that power everyday speech. From *Let's Roll!* to *You 'da Man*, they leap out of our sentences to declare *y-know what I mean, duuuude?* Leslie Savan, the former advertising columnist for *The Village Voice* and author of *Slam Dunks and No-Brainers*, claims these catchwords, quickie-concepts, and inflections have mastisized into what she cleverly calls “‘verbal kudzu,’ overlaying regional differences with a national (even an international) pop accent that tells us more about how we think than we think.”

*Slam Dunks* picks up where Savan's last book, *The Sponsored Life: Ads, TV, and American Culture* left off. She's still watching a lot of TV ads (and taking careful notes) but *Slam Dunks* takes a wider and more comprehensive view of language and culture. Underneath this story is a premonition of a problem—that social relationships are becoming entangled in the media-marketing complex—one that should have all of us re-thinking the risks of verbal diets larded with snappy phrases.

She relates the story, for instance, told in Bob Woodward's book *Plan of Attack*, about Vice President Dick Cheney's skill in persuading a reluctant Prince Bandar of Saudi Arabia to go to war in Iraq. It illustrates perfectly the Orwellian dangers of political speech. Bandar was not convinced the U.S. would get rid of Saddam after our failure to do so in the Gulf War. Cheney reportedly convinced the Prince with a twist on the swaggering phrase used by Bill Murray in *Ghostbusters*: “Saddam is toast!” If that was not enough chutzpah to re-imagine the Oval Office as a high school locker room, CIA director George Tenet described the mission to find WMDs in Iraq to President Bush as “a slam-dunk case!” You can almost hear the hiss of the President's giddy response as he arm-pumps *Yesss!* Is it time for another screening of *The Manchurian Candidate*?

Pop language, Savan explains, includes heaps of slang, but pop is more than slang, cliché, or jargon. *Bling Bling* is slang, but *Who's your daddy?* and *I don't think so* are normal words with a thick glaze of attitude, nod nod, wink, wink. “A pop phrase packs more rhetorical oomph and social punch than a conventional cliché,” Savan writes. “It's the difference, say, between *it's as plain as the nose on your face* and *Duh*,

between *old hat* and *sooo five minutes ago*. Pop is the elite corps of clichés. Pop eats slang for breakfast.”

The book is arranged around a number of themes including race, media, politics, put-downs, the ‘regular guy,’ new-age social/psychobabble, and twenty-first century corporate-speak. In “What’s Black, Then White, Then Said All Over?” Savan explores the dominance of African-American culture in popular speech, including *baaad*, *in your face*, *give it up*, *chill*, *groovy*, *24/7*, *you go, girl*, and one of my favorites, *Whasssup?* (mass-crossover-popularized by a Budweiser TV ad). And don’t forget the preeminent pop word of all time, *cool*.

In “Don’t Even Think About Telling Me ‘I Don’t Think So,’ ” Savan plumbs the depths of mass-media meanness with phrases like *Excuuuse me*, *kick-butt*, *smack-down*, and *What the f###ck?*, explaining how many pop words are onomatopoeic, made up of ‘plosives,’ or consonants that create hard sounds. In the section titled “The Community of Commitment-Centered Words” she skewers the faith-based, civic do-gooders who strung a banner across a city street that read: “Let’s Take a Proactive Approach for Community Wellness.”

Savan is a master of the journalistic essay—a sprinter in the 1500 word snap-crackle-pop event—but *Slam Dunks* had me occasionally wondering whether she had the stuff for the long-distance, book-length marathon. There were times when I felt she was winded—her metaphors (like this one) looked tired and she was starting to repeat herself and run in circles (*Puh-leeze!*). Still, she has an amazing skill to look closely at the most ordinary speech and write about it with clarity, insight, and great style. Throughout the book she cites linguists, anthropologists, writers and journalists, who make this trip through popular speech totally enjoyable. In a long and interesting discussion of the origins of *Yesss!* and its accompanying arm pump, Savan cites sportswriter Jeff Z. Klein, author of *Messier*, (about the hockey star) and Desmond Morris, the pop-anthropologist and author of *Gestures: Their Origins and Distribution*.

Design has always had an uneasy relationship with celebrity marketing in a camera-ready culture. Victor Papanek, Jean Baudrillard, C. Wright Mills and others have criticized designers who create an appetite for an excessive and surreal material culture. *Slam Dunks* should interest designers because their work can often be viewed as pop speech rendered in form—abbreviated, reduced expressions of contemporary lifestyles.

Although *Slam Dunks and No-Brainers* is a fun, educational, fast-paced catalog of pop speech and its origins in and connections to culture, it comes with a warning: that the over use of pop speech can be a slippery slope. Like Neil Postman wrote (without Savan’s style) in his seminal book *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, (1986), she argues that pop phrases are becoming a kind of multi-functional sales lubricant that can be used to sell everything from i-Pods to political arguments to, in this age of ‘personal branding,’ ourselves.

In the end *Slam Dunks* asks readers to recognize and manage the role language plays in their lives. Savan asks: “Do you ever get a sour taste in your mouth from your own ironic comebacks? Do you secretly hope your words are playing to a phantom crowd? Do you ever use popular phrases to do the speaking for you?” *Slam Dunks* should make us stop and think.

Uhm, yeah, right. I’m outta here! APPLAUSE!