

## ISLE OF MAN

## Is that a \$7,000 pistol in your pages?



ROB CRIBB

It wasn't long ago that the sheer arrogance of producing a high-end, 200-page glossy fashion publication for Canadian men might have earned you admittance to a mental hospital.

No longer, it seems. Toronto-based Contempo Media — already crazy enough to publish a six-times-a-year Canadian men's magazine called *Sharp* — has just released a coffee table *Book For Men* filled with sumptuous images of men's fashion, gadgetry, travel, health and grooming advice.

The *Book* may be the first oversized, glitzy, American-style publication for Canadian lugs filled with provocatively lit photos of cigars, flat-screen TVs and beautiful models shot in glamorous settings around the continent, all sandwiched between ads for such rarefied brands as Louis Vuitton, Rolex, Chanel and BMW.

Since when can those advertisers find Canada on a map?

Let us ponder the notion that the *Book For Men* — a twice-annual publication now in its second edition — may indicate that fashion-forward, urbane Canuck men have reached a tipping point.

There appears to be a sufficient number of us interested in sartorial extravaganzas such as \$5,000 bespoke suits, \$16,000 watches and \$1,700 travel bags to sustain a made-in-Canada publication modelled on *GQ*, *Details* and *Esquire*.

"The Canadian man is coming of age in terms of style and the finer things in life and refinement, and that goes hand in hand with having the means to do so," says Michael La Fave, Contempo's co-owner and



In the spring *Book for Men* you'll find such luxury items as this Brunello Cucinelli cardigan (\$1,275) and Burberry short coat (\$950).

editorial and creative director.

They may even be one-upping the Americans at their own game, if that's possible.

Consider, for example, the distinctly un-Canadian status symbols featured in the *Book*: a \$7,000 hand-engraved Browning pistol, \$45,000 binoculars and \$600 sunglasses (Louis Vuitton, of course).

There's no intention here to make the magazine a distinctly Canadian voice, says La Fave. In fact, there's little indication beyond the masthead suggesting any maple leaf-

ness at all.

"Our (reader) doesn't care. He's a professional. He's going to assess this on its merits, not whether its Canadian or not," says La Fave. "We're standing on the fact that this is as good or better than anything produced in the U.S."

The fall 2010 edition of the *Book*, its first, doubled the sales of the most direct American competitor, *Esquire's Big Black Book*, on Canadian newsstands, La Fave says.

And advertising sales nearly tri-



pled in dollars for the current edition, he says, while the number of ad pages jumped 50 per cent.

It's all a curiosity in the context of Canada's volatile magazine industry, where even impressive efforts often suffocate.

The most relevant case here is the pioneering *Toro*, which gave life in 2003 to the idea of a sophisticated and stylishly produced magazine for Canadian men.

It expertly balanced celebrity features on the likes of Ryan Reynolds and Sam Roberts with probing journalism that earned the publication dozens of National Magazine Award nominations.

Then, in 2007, *Toro* claimed its birthright as a Canadian magazine and ceased publication.

Don't expect to see the same award-winning journalistic mission in the efforts that have filled its vacuum.

*UMM — Urban Male Magazine* — dates back to 1998 and is a far more frat-boyish effort heavy on youth-skewed stories about "babes," gadgets, bars, bands and cars.

Peppered throughout are product images, not simply in advertisements, but as content ("This Season's Must Haves For Men in Their

20s, 30s, 40s, 50s and Better").

*Sharp* published its first issue in April 2008 and is also heavy on product placement. A piece in its latest edition on men's fragrances is complete with photos of off-the-shelf products placed amid splashing water, while a photo shoot features trench coats that cost upwards of \$2,000.

Product porn—often products brought to you by a magazine's advertisers—clearly breaks the *Toro* model.

And that's the point. "I think it's fair that we probably learned from their mistakes," says La Fave.

His explanation flows like a classic supply-and-demand business school lecture.

"It became apparent in doing *Sharp* that there was demand on the part of advertisers and readers for something more high end, something with a more consistently luxurious environment that would draw premium and luxury advertisers.

The word "journalism" never comes up. But it's tough to argue the point.

The team behind *Sharp* has built this modern, lush merging of male editorial and advertising and we have anxiously come.

The "we" here are upwardly mobile men ages 25 to 54 who are financially capable of acquiring the products in the book or the aspirational younger men being groomed as future purchasers of Ferraris and \$150 bottles of moisturizer.

"We framed our business around what we knew was real."

Whatever you make of the strategy, one thing seems clear: Canadian guys have at least earned the right to be courted.

And it's working.

Robert Cribb welcomes questions, comments and suggestions at [rcribb@thestar.ca](mailto:rcribb@thestar.ca)



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