

Spin

Reviewed by

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Content and Scope

The novel *Spin* follows a crisis through the eyes of a fictional veteran crisis management expert named Jonathan Keaton as he is brought into BeeLine, an Apple-like technology company, when its CEO Bradford Sisley becomes embroiled in a sexual harassment complaint. Readers need only enjoy a compelling story and lively narrative to appreciate the book's content. They should also appreciate punchy dialogue. The book is written in first-person, and the conversational style makes readers feel like confidants with Keaton throughout the duration of the crisis.

The first-person narrator spends quite a bit of time on his personal life, allowing the reader to identify with him. Indeed, as *Spin* opens, Keaton reflects on his decision to work for a client whom he knows to be problematic. We learn later that Keaton's primary motivation is financial, and that he is typically paid handsomely for his work. If money is an indication, Keaton has a well-earned reputation as a crisis management expert.

It is evident early on that the author is a former senior public

relations counselor. He weaves real-life individuals who were outed during the #MeToo movement (Bennett, 2017)—Bill Cosby (Bowley, 2018), Matt Lauer (Nark, 2017), and Harvey Weinstein (Cooney, 2017)—situating the fictional universe of *Spin* within the present socio-political environment. Moreover, mentions of the corporate crises of BP Amoco (Shogren, 2011) and Enron (Reber & Gower, 2006) suggest a shared history.

Organization of Book

Formatting each chapter to correspond with days of the week affords an easy-to-navigate narrative. The eight chapters of the book are laid out chronologically according to the roughly 10-day duration of the crisis. The narrative centers on three main characters: crisis management expert Jonathan Keaton, BeeLine CEO Bradford Sisley, and BeeLine vice president of public relations, Wendy Smith-Kenyon.

The book opens on a Thursday as Keaton arrives to meet Smith-Kenyon. As the chapter continues into BeeLine headquarters, the CEO explains to them that the woman who has accused him of sexual harassment has hired a media-savvy attorney—one with more than a passing resemblance to Gloria Allred (Tolentino, 2017) in passion and press appeal. Readers quickly learn how a hostile client can derail a plan, choosing a course of action that is not only unhelpful but also overtly harmful (e.g., Bruning & Ledingham, 2002). The CEO insists that (1) he is innocent, (2) he would never settle any lawsuit, and (3) he intends to be the voice of men who are falsely accused.

With their crisis management strategy in full swing, Keaton and Smith-Kenyon sync media lists, while he crafts a media statement and she begins planning a press conference. Readers get a front-seat view of carefully planned media interactions, “overhearing” one of the calls Keaton has with a long-time media contact about the pending story. As the story is picked up by news media, readers also witness real-time media monitoring as they analyze the content and tone of coverage to provide

strategic counsel to the CEO (e.g., Veil, Buehner, & Palenchar, 2011; Wigley & Zhang, 2011).

As is typical of crises in the #MeToo era, this crisis gets worse before it gets better. On Tuesday, a disgruntled former employee impugns the CEO's character on a morning talk show while late-night talk-show hosts use sharp-edged comedy to ridicule him about the harassment claim. Without revealing too much of the plot, suffice it to say that the CEO tries to manage his own media appearances with disastrous consequences. As expected, the story continues to gain traction, hitting national airwaves.

Wednesday is split into two chapters, with chapter four taking place in the morning. What begins as a strategy session with Keaton, Smith-Kenyon, and CEO Sisley, quickly devolves as the CEO continues to ignore their advice. Soon thereafter, the company is publicly outed by a BeeLine insider as a "poisonously hostile work environment" whose leadership is deemed "sexist, racist, homophobic, ageist, and dictatorial" (p. 126). Given that BeeLine is a public company, when the story hits the business news, its stock price takes a hit. We learn here just how interconnected public relations and investor relations are to a company's industry status.

A member of the BeeLine internal communications team emerges on Wednesday afternoon. She holds particular prominence in the company because of her status as the daughter of the company co-founder, and she quickly asserts her power. From her, readers learn that employee morale has also taken a hit, adding internal communications to Keaton's concerns. Here, the book casts a clear-eyed view of the inherent challenges of internal and external public relations teams working together, sometimes at cross-purposes (e.g., Cardwell, Williams, & Pyle, 2017).

The Thursday of the crisis is when the twist of the story occurs, articulating for the reader the true origins of the crisis. The "Final Days" cannot be shared without revealing a spoiler, but it is worth noting that

the reader will come to understand why Keaton has been largely unable to control the media narrative surrounding the harassment complaint. Those seeking a happy ending can be assured that a perfectly worded statement about upcoming company changes could very well find its way to the media at precisely the right time.

Ideally, *Spin* would include information about the narrator's educational background. Readers are left to assume whether his extensive experience includes a particular degree, professional practice, or a mixture of both. Too, the book only conveys the narrator's expertise in the past tense. The reader learns about Keaton serving as a consultant for several other clients and companies, additionally, characters repeatedly reference his reputation as an industry expert.

Another area that seems out of place is the repeated references to the lead character's physical attributes that sometimes distract from the story. Negative self-talk focuses extensive attention on his weight and propensity to overeat. However, the fact that his sardonic humor is reflected in characterizations of others suggests this is merely a personality quirk. More notable is the fact that his limited knowledge of digital media seems incompatible with his status as a crisis management expert.

Contribution to Public Relations Education

Although *Spin* is written for entertainment purposes, the novel does contribute to public relations education. As an educator whose research interests include media representations of public relations, I have facilitated robust classroom discussions about the differences between how Olivia Pope handles a crisis versus her real-world counterparts. Film-based public relations characters hold similar value as a teaching tool (Lambert, 2011). It would be difficult to overstate how much depictions of client relations and corporate communications in this book align with real-world issues public relations professionals encounter. Educators who are seeking a creative approach to teaching corporate or crisis communication

could supplement coursework with this book. Also, discussing the morally ambiguous actions of some of the public relations characters in *Spin* could help students think critically about questions of ethics versus effectiveness in public relations. Finally, the public relations specialties showcased in *Spin* remind readers about the many sectors available to industry professionals. Students can only benefit from knowing about the variety of career opportunities in the field.

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