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A business book I can read, even without dragons or romance

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OPINION, Kalamazoo Gazette

By B. Candace Beeke

candaceb@mbusinessreview.com

I'm going to let you in on one of my darkest secrets. I don't like business books.

That's a serious admission for the editor of a business newspaper to make and one I don't share often.

I have heard and read enough to understand the basic premises of the top business bibles.

Heck, I even met Thomas Friedman at a Business Review event. He gave me a signed copy of his newest book — at least, I think it's signed. I haven't opened it.

Now don't get me wrong. I'm a reader. I have read voraciously all my life, but — and in the business world this is an even bigger admission — I prefer fiction. That's right, I like Barbara Kingsolver and Nick Hornby and John Irving. Sometimes, I even read Stephen King, so take that.

It's not that I don't like hedgehogs and cheese. In fact, I read about them all the time — to my kids. But at the end of the day, the last thing I want to do is relax and think about business.

However, I am blessed to be surrounded by leaders who devour business books and share their Cliff Notes' wisdom with me. One of those people is Ron Kitchens, head of Southwest Michigan First in Kalamazoo. He and his staff read at least 12 business books a year. They absorb and discuss the principles of these texts and grow as leaders and community members.

And sometimes they try to tell me about them.

Kitchens is a pretty persuasive guy, and when he believes in something, he'll find a way to "burden you with knowledge," as he says.

So, right now on my nightstand is a big, thick, hardcover book — “Thriving in the New Economy.” There’s nary a dragon or a romance in it, unless you count the love affair Wall Street had with subprime a couple years back. Now there’s a treacherous plot.

Author and CNBC Producer Lori Ann LaRocco spoke with several of the nation’s top business leaders about their challenges and strategies during the ongoing economic downturn. So far, it’s pretty interesting.

The wisdom of Steve Forbes, head of Forbes magazine, is especially noteworthy to those of us in media. In the book he talks about the significant decline of print advertising in 2007 and how his company responded. At the time, Forbes had invested much in its new online endeavors, and the sudden loss of 40 percent of advertising in its core product, the magazine, gave Mr. Forbes pause.

He had to decide whether to retreat from his investments in the Web site — basically representing R&D at that time for business media — and focus instead on maintaining his traditional product.

He continued the development of Forbes.com, and when the market turned, he had a significant advantage over his competitors online, who had chosen a different strategy.

It reminds me of words spoken years ago by Nelson Jacobson, CEO of JSJ Corp. in Grand Haven, which owns several manufacturing companies in West Michigan. At one of our publication’s events, Jacobson told a room of business leaders that JSJ’s strategy was to “invest into the teeth of a recession.”

The power of that image stays with me. I believe strongly in strategic investment in innovation.

It’s why Business Review launched a new weekly e-pub this year, Influence West Michigan.

With more than 7,000 e-mail subscribers, Influence already is one of the largest electronic news pubs in the state. That testifies to the changing landscape of news delivery and the new directions the media must pursue to find our readers.

So maybe this business book thing isn’t all bad. Even if I haven’t had any revelations or insights yet, I at least feel reassured that we’re moving in the right direction.

IF YOU GO

What: Author visit, sponsored by Business Review and the Kalamazoo Gazette.

Who: Lori Ann LaRocco, CNBC producer and author of “Thriving in the New Economy.”

When: 3:30 to 5 p.m. March 24.

Where: Radisson Plaza Hotel and Suites, Kalamazoo.

Register:
<http://loriannlarocco.eventbrite.com>