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Ginger Kanadoo: Are any real-estate agents really this bad?

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—Imagine Lucille Ball as a 59-year-old real-estate agent in fictional Squamskootnocket, NY, a spot that once boasted a Gummy Bear factory and still has a lake, now suffocating beneath a thickening mat of Japanese weeds.

Its “hopping downtown” features a gas station, as well as a lot of real estate that’s not being listed or sold.

Here strides Ginger Kanadoo—real-estate salesperson. Once a colossus who might have made a living, now she’s a shadow of her own memory. Beset, she is, by Zinfandel dependency, chronic dishonesty, 40 pounds of donut fat, a pot-smoking mother, a Wiccan daughter, impending foreclosure on her own house, a ghost who wants to bathe in a Jacuzzi, no cash and no sales for more than a year. She has fulfilled her high school trajectory as Most Likely to Never Leave Town.

A lot of people seem to have run into a ditzy, self-deluded, fruit-loop agent like Ginger, says Erica Ferencik, author of the forthcoming *Cracks in the Foundation* at www.WakingDreamPress.com, \$14.95.

Ferencik, a veteran realtor and self-described “recovering standup comic” from the Boston area, tells me that all of her fellow agents, save one, love her book. I will be surprised if this ratio of lovers to haters holds. I will be even more surprised if the National Association of Realtors and its 1.2 million members give Ferencik the Most-Likely-to-Have-Polished-Our-Image award this year

More than two million real-estate agents work among us. Some will have a sense of humor about themselves and their profession. These folks will find Ginger and her shenanigans hilarious--she ends up in jail for attempting to murder her 20-something office rival who knows how to use a computer. Most, however, will, I think, find offense.

I encourage both sides to buy the book—and read it too.

It’s easy to laugh at yourself when you’re the one cracking the joke at your own expense. It’s not so easy when someone else is telling the joke on you. Ferencik’s comic exaggeration cuts close, very close.

A 2006 Harris poll found that of 11 professions listed only seven percent of the 2,300 adults surveyed “completely” trusted a real-estate agent and only 65

percent “somewhat trusted” that professional. Only stockbrokers ranked lower. Twenty percent of the survey population said that they trusted an agent, “not at all.”

(http://www.harrisinteractive.com/harris_poll/index.asp?PID=661.)

These results do not involve the fictional Ginger Kanadoo. Presumably, opinions of those surveyed are based on actual experience. Why might so many Americans hold this low opinion of real-estate professionals? That would be a poll worth funding.

My uneducated guess is that it has something to do with how some -- not all -- agents act with buyers and sellers. I have had wonderful experiences with agents and brokers. I also have had them lie, reveal the terms of my offer to other buyers in hope of getting a higher price or fewer contingencies, conceal material defects, not disclose material defects, encourage me to falsify a survey and provide false information.

Unlike most professionals, real-estate brokers and agents are allowed to engage in puffing, which is an opinion that exaggerates a property’s virtues or minimizes its liabilities. As long as puffing falls within the ballpark of opinion, it’s legal to hit the pitch anywhere. If facts are misstated, however, that’s fraud, which is not legal.

Might the public have a higher opinion of real-estate people if they simply expressed opinions, without exaggerating in either direction?

Here’s how Ginger practices real estate.

She lies to her clients. With regard to her first listing in a year -- a two-seater outhouse on an unbuildable lot -- she tells the owner: “We’ve had tons of interest, you know, inquiries.... I wouldn’t be surprised if we had a bidding war by the weekend.”

She informs a buyer about her client, the seller: “And let me just toss in, on the QT...the seller is mulling a price change on this place, so don’t feel too confined by the asking price.”

She loses one of her seller’s twin female dachshunds. When asked if she’s going to tell her client, Ginger says, “Of course not!” Instead, she buys a replacement dog that turns out to be a male.

She tells a subdivision builder who’s just signed a listing contract with an office rival. “You’re not stuck with her. You can tear up that contract right now. You are not obligated to it.”

To make a lake-front sale to an out-of-town couple who are coming back in

the morning to see whether the lake is too weedy, Ginger steals a boat that night and plucks weeds in an effort to trick her buyers.

Her daughter asks her: “So you’re not going to tell them that this lake is always weedy?”

Ginger replies: “No! Duh?”

“You know what, Mom? You have no moral compass.”

Ginger replies. “Is that bad?”

“Yes, it’s bad! You’re supposed to tell people the truth!”

“Look,” Ginger says, “...there’s all different levels of truth.”

Ginger is full blown. She makes no distinction between permissible puffing and bald-faced fraud. She employs the full keyboard of untruth, every note. Self-deception is as much a part of her as the falsehoods she uses to deceive others.

How much of Erica Ferencik’s portrait of a real-estate agent as an aging caricature is wickedly funny fictional satire and how much is reporting from the front lines? Each reader can draw that line.

If I were a licensed real-estate agent, Ginger would make me squirm...and laugh...and squirm...and laugh. No one likes to be skewered, particularly by an insider. This self-critical look at the real-estate profession is hard to dismiss because it is intended to make fun of the norm, not the exception.

Cracks in the Foundation is well-written comedy. It’s zany in the ways of Max Shulman, best known for his Dobie Gillis stories.

You’ll laugh at Ginger whose personality is built on the shallowest of foundations. But there’s a sadness here too. Most readers can identify with the feelings of being star-crossed, of nothing working out right, of most things not the way they used to be.

Ferencik is a witty writer. She has an eye for stereotypes and an ear for dialogue.

The story moves quickly from one Lucy-type mess to the next, which is always a little worse.

Ginger, I should add, changes. And a happy ending is had by all. Except me. I had grown fond of watching Ginger make everything worse.

Ferencik thinks that real-estate pros will buy her book. I think her buyers will be civilians who believe they have been run over by Ginger on the battlefield.

Ginger has a blog at www.WakingDreamPress.com. And the author has an email at Erica@wakingdreampress.com. Cracks in the Foundation will be available this summer.

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