

Go, State!

Publisher Mascot Books is a start-up all-star



Aimee and Naren Aryal

KEITH BARRACLOUGH

souvenir sounded like a fine idea to Aimee, who graduated from the university with an accounting degree in 1993 (Naren graduated in 1992). But once inside the campus bookstore, she realized there was no such book to be found.

So on the way from Blacksburg back to their house in northern Virginia, Aimee wrote one.

The book, *Hello, Hokie Bird!*, quickly became a favorite of Anna's. And it gave Naren an idea. He'd been practicing law for about a decade, working mostly for high-tech start-ups. But after the dot-com bust, his prospects were looking grim. So after reading *Hokie Bird* to Anna for the umpteenth time, in 2003 he and Aimee—both Costco members—formed Mascot Books. Naren then persuaded Virginia Tech to grant Mascot Books a license to publish *Hello, Hokie Bird!* and asked a fellow Virginia Tech grad, Sarah Meadows, to draw the illustrations.

Within three months, all copies of the children's book were sold out at three campus bookstores. Ditto for the stock at the Barnes & Noble store near Virginia Tech. Naren knew Mascot Books was going to be a winner. In fact, soon after their second daughter, Maya, was born, *Hokie Bird* was listed in 13th place on the bestseller list for Barnes & Noble's southern region.

Naren quickly approached other colleges to write stories about their mascots, and in the last three years Aimee has written 45 books, including *Hello, Nittany Lion!* (Penn State) and *Let's Go, Irish* (Notre Dame).

Then he decided to try the concept with professional sports teams. He pitched his idea to several former pro baseball players and asked if they'd be official authors of the books. "They went wild for the idea," says the young

By Hope Katz Gibbs

BACK IN 2002, Aimee Aryal was a mom on a mission. She and her husband, Naren, had just taken their 2-year-old daughter, Anna, to watch their college alma mater, Virginia Tech, play a football game. On the way out of the stadium the toddler made a request: "Mommy, I want a book about the Hokie Bird."

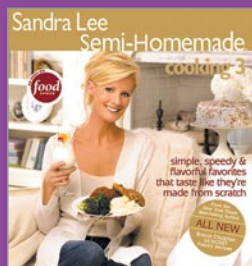
The Hokie Bird, of course, is Virginia Tech's mascot. And the idea of taking home a

The Costco Connection

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"Give yourself permission to get the most out of your life. If you're spending all your time scrubbing corners with a toothbrush, you're kind of missing the point. Taking shortcuts doesn't mean shortcutting the end result."

—Sandra Lee

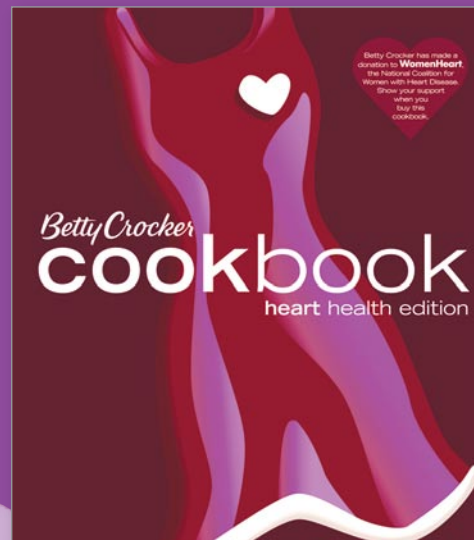


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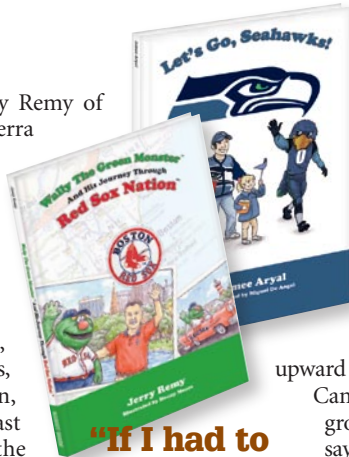
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publisher, who signed Jerry Remy of the Boston Red Sox, Yogi Berra of the New York Yankees, Rusty Staub of the New York Mets and Ozzie Smith of the St. Louis Cardinals to write books.

Naren has also made deals with National Basketball Association teams, including the Dallas Mavericks, whose owner, Mark Cuban, penned *Let's Go, Mavs!* Last year, Naren focused on the National Football League, and in August Mascot Books released eight new books about NFL teams, including the Dallas Cowboys and the Green Bay Packers. The National Hockey League is next on his hit list.

Fans seem to be eating it up. "What we love most about running this company is the fact that we are helping sports fans tap into some really great rivalries," shares Naren, who has met more than one proud father-to-be



"If I had to sum it up, I'd say that good teamwork is really the theme of Mascot Books."

—Naren Aryal

who bought a Mascot Book to read to the baby in utero.

It's not bad for business, either. With more than 500,000 books sold to date, Naren projects that by 2010 Mascot Books will be publishing 25 titles per year and generating upward of \$12 million annually.

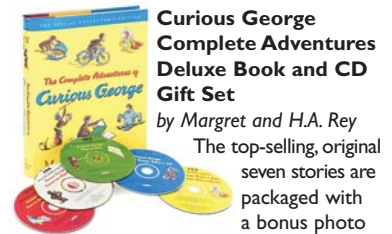
Can the company sustain such growth? "I definitely think so," says Naren, who credits Aimee with never being at a loss for ideas. He points to her latest character, Cort the Sport, an anthropomorphic trophy with a positive attitude.

"Cort promotes three rules of sportsmanship: Try your best, play by the rules and be a good sport—win or lose," explains Aimee. "If I had to sum it up, I'd say that good teamwork is really the theme of Mascot Books. Whether we are writing about a college or professional team, or a child com-

peting in a spelling bee, the goal is to play fair and have a good time. I think that's a big lesson for life, and it's what I want my children, and all children, to grow up knowing." [E]

Hope Katz Gibbs is a freelance writer in Clifton, Virginia, who is eagerly awaiting a Mascot title for her college alma mater, the University of Pennsylvania. Go, Quakers!

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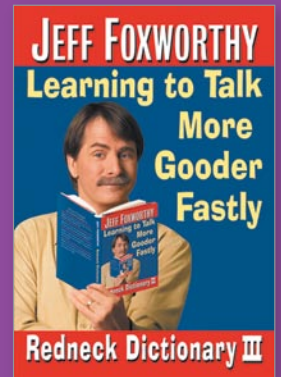
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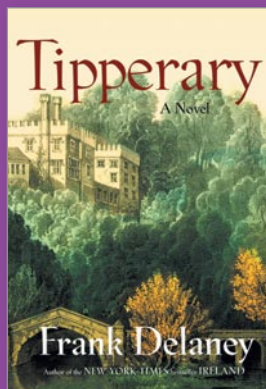
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—Rachael Ray

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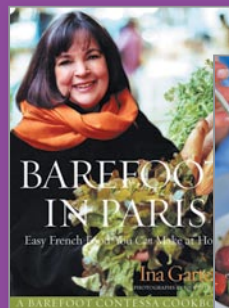


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