

SELF-HELP IS MORE HURT

By CHRISTINE B. WHELAN

SHAM: How the Self-Help Movement Made America Helpless

By Steve Salerno

Crown, 288 pages, \$24.95

In the 1980s, self-help books promised to reveal the repressed pain of our inner children. In the '90s, advice experts told those same whining kids to grow up and just deal with it. And recently, with the huge success of "The Purpose Driven Life," the self-help industry has taken on a distinctly religious tone. But according to Steve Salerno's new book "Sham: How the Self-Help Movement Made America Helpless," it doesn't matter how the advice is packaged: The platitudes and ineffective mantras of self-help have spread like a social Ebola virus and we need a vaccine to protect ourselves.

Salerno argues that self-help books may be the *cause* of America's social problems, and that these very popular texts might carry warning labels: "May undermine established standards of ethical behavior" and "May prolong the course of your so-called illness."

He attributes high divorce rates to books and relationship seminars that encourage couples to be too focused on their own personal fulfillment, and blames ineffective career coaching and team-building workshops for sluggish productivity. And since conservative estimates suggest that half of all Americans have purchased a self-help book, it's time to take notice.

Salerno presents in-depth and juicy profiles of self-help giants Dr. Phil McGraw, Oprah's golden boy of advice, and Tony Robbins, the big-toothed self-improvement salesman.

His most original research, however, is about "life coaches" — part oracle, part cheerleader and no training required — and "*contrepreneurs*" — convicted criminals and drug addicts born-again as inspirational speakers to teach us law-abiding lemmings how to be released from our own inner prisons.

Self-help advice is pervasive, and Salerno wants us to stop thinking of it as

harmless feel-good mantras and start considering its facile advice as "a contributing factor (at minimum) to many of the social problems now plaguing our society."

Does this give the gurus too much credit? Does Dr. Phil really have the power to make you reconsider your life goals? Maybe, maybe not, but the publishing, seminar and coaching industries increase their supply of advice in response to consumer demand.

Self-improvement is an \$8.56 billion business in the U.S., and it's not clear what we're getting for that money. Empirical research is scarce: Qualified professionals have evaluated only a tiny fraction of the tens of thousands of self-help books in print. In the '90s, there were only 15 studies testing the efficacy of self-help books, compared with the more than 22,000 self-help titles in print each year during that decade.

Yet according to recent studies, some 85 percent of psychotherapists recommend self-help books to their clients. These therapists should read Salerno's book — then maybe they'll refrain from making such recommendations.

If you've been bitten by the self-help bug, "Sham" is the perfect antidote to protect you from being duped. Throw it in your beach tote along with "The Purpose Driven Life" and your collection of Dr. Phil books. Your inner child will thank you.

Dr. Christine B. Whelan recently received her Ph.D. from the University of Oxford for her research on the self-help industry.