

The Future of Publishing

Notes from a Bouchercon panel, Austin, Texas, October 2002

Though I am on this panel representing the views of authors, I won't comment on this topic from that perspective because publishers have a "*pas devant les enfants*" approach with their writers – an attitude that's, frankly, okay by *moi*. I have enough problems, and the news about this business is unremittingly gloomy. In fact, there is only one prediction about the future that I can make with absolute confidence: in the foreseeable future there will be no downturn in the amount of time spent whining and bitching about the state of the industry.

Why are we so pessimistic? Perhaps because we tend to compare the present to a golden age that never existed. John Baker has said accurately that publishing was "a small business producing a limited number of books for a cozy elite readership whose access to bookstores was limited by geography."

Certainly, that has changed. There are more opportunities than ever for readers to find books and to find a wider variety of books through more channels than ever before. But still we worry. Here are some comments on the dreadful state of things from *Publisher's Weekly* that will sound very familiar.

- "Too few children are raised in houses with books." Stanley Unwin quoted in 1927.
- "The emphasis on bestsellers ... has lately been carried too far in the booktrade." George Brett quoted in 1929.
- In order to promote reading, George F. Rittenhouse proposed "a new way to sell more books": have celebrities talk up books. Then others "will want to read the books because they had become part of the town's conversation." 1936.
- And on the critical social role of books: "The country needs to know, through books, more about what it means to be in a world in crisis ... we ought to know about a score of countries whose affairs are now vital to us." 1941

Also in the 1930s I saw complaints about sale of advanced reader copies; complaints about "merger mania" in the 1960s, and in 1973 a colloquium of publishers said things we still hear today: advertising is a waste of money, there are too few review media, market research won't work in the booktrade, and finally - no one was sure whether computers would really change the industry or not. *Plus ca change...*

In fall 2000, I spent a sabbatical interviewing people in the business - editors, publishers, agents, people working in marketing and publicity, and observers from *The New York Times*, *PW*, and academia – about the business. The first person I approached with the question "how does trade publishing work?" gave me an odd look and said, "Who told you it works?" I quickly got the message – I had discovered a business that made even less sense than higher ed, and that's saying something.

I wrote a "[Report from the Front](#)" for an academic library publication about what I learned. One of the questions I asked my informants was "What keeps you awake nights – what are the pressing issues facing the industry?" Three things emerged as primary concerns.

Growing the market for books. I got the impression from many people in the industry that all readers were in their eighties and when they pegged out, there would be no one left to buy books. In fact, a Gallup poll and the Statistical Abstract as well as British data suggest more people of all ages have been reading more books and reading more frequently than ten years ago. Also, though concerns were raised about competition for time and attention with television and the Internet, these media are also valuable channels for readers and writers to connect. Michael Korda has said television saved publishing by providing for the first time a way for writers to talk to millions of people about their work. The Internet offers the same opportunity.

Inefficiencies of the marketplace. Guessing at how many books to print and getting them in the hands of readers when they want them is tricky and expensive. Inventory systems in the large chains have made this worse—knowing from hour to hour how a book is selling makes chains more efficient at pulling the plug. According to David Kirkpatrick, in his [Report to the Author's Guild Midlist Books Study Committee](#) (2000), though the chains offer a wide variety of midlist books on their shelves, they are treated essentially as “wallpaper.” They don't receive the sales support as do those titles for which there is a generous marketing budget for placement and coop advertising. Changes in printing technology may well improve publishers' ability to get books out more quickly and more cheaply with less waste in future.

Corporate ownership of the major trade publishing houses. A cottage industry, where books are handcrafted one at a time, doesn't merge well with corporate culture and demands for quick return on investment. Developing a list takes time. It's more like growing trees than growing soybeans and demands for quick profits don't make sense. Furthermore, it's a matter of playing hunches. There's no way, short of intuition and experience, to guess at how well a book will fare in the marketplace and, as Geoff Shandler, Executive Editor at Little, Brown, told me, “Editors are mostly wrong.” Brian Tart, Editor in Chief at Dutton said in the current corporate environment there's more money to acquire and market commercially attractive books, but also more opportunity to crash and burn. A few bad calls could take a take a house under. Finally, I came away from my conversations convinced publishing houses have two key assets: their list and their editors. Though support functions – sales, marketing, publicity and so on – are all important, editors are key and they are constantly being squeezed to do more with less. They're paid too little and are asked to work too hard; that hurts the list, which is the product. Any publisher who fails to protect its major assets is making a big mistake.

When I did my interviews in 2000, e-books were presumed to be the future of publishing. The main strategy was that, by cutting someone out of the picture, money would be saved and those additional profits would be the industry's saving grace. But not enough people asked a basic question: What's in it for the reader? Within months, the bubble had burst—the expensive gamble on e-books didn't pay off for the big houses. Two recent studies on readers' responses to e-books are surprising: [older readers](#) checking e-books out from a public library liked them for leisure reading, especially happy with being able to enlarge text and read in bed with the lights off; [college students](#), on the other hand, hated e-book readers for textbooks, complaining they caused eyestrain and made it much harder to locate information. Additional studies on college students' use of information suggest they are far more interested in using print information than pundits predict. One other issue that will need to be followed is balancing legitimate fear of piracy with readers' natural desire to share books – recommendations from friends is one of the most common ways people choose books; sharing books we love feels only natural and is an important means of “growing the market.” We need to enable responsible sharing of books in a digital environment or we'll alienate readers.

In spite of these concerns and in spite of an industry habitually prone to a “sky is falling” outlook, I’m pretty sure the future of publishing is this: there will be readers looking for good books, there will be writers ready to write them, and smart publishers will find a way to put them together.