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Issues in Vendor/Library Relations -- The Author and the eBook

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Issues in Vendor/Library Relations — The Author and the eBook



by **Ian Colford** (Assistant University Librarian for Collections Development, Killam Library, Dalhousie University, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada B3H 4H8; Phone: 902-494-3687; Fax: 902-494-2062) <icolford@dal.ca>

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It’s probably fair to say that eBooks — as an inevitable byproduct of the Internet — have revolutionized pedagogy: that is, the way information is accessed, absorbed, and processed into knowledge. Before digitization, a book had to be read *cover to cover* in order for the reader to be certain that he or she wasn’t missing something. But with eBooks key phrases and concepts can be searched and specific pages targeted for reading. The rest of the book can be safely ignored. Some vendors have even begun breaking books down into component parts and marketing individual chapters. The root concept of *bookness* is changing before our eyes. With all these advances in technology, is something being gained or lost? Readers of eBooks, who are saving time by avoiding irrelevant passages, are also less apt to serendipitously happen across surprising or unexpected bits of illumination lurking in unlikely places. Searchable eBooks take chance out of the equation. There is no reason to browse. Readers are not going to visit pages that don’t match their search criteria because they know beyond any doubt that those pages will not yield the information they’re looking for.

Much has been written about the eBook and its impact on students and casual readers, on academic and public library collections. But what of the author? Other than providing raw text that the publisher edits, formats, and then markets, does the author have any role to play once his or her eBook has been published?

With regard to this issue I enjoy a dual perspective, being both a librarian and an author. My book of short fiction was published last year. I’ll admit that it is inexpressibly satisfying to watch someone walk away carrying a signed copy of your book, presumably with the intention of either giving it as a gift or sitting down with it in a comfortable chair and delving into its pages.

This brings us — predictably enough — to the book as a tangible object. My ideas on this topic are neither new nor particularly unique, but I will put them down here as a preface to what I really want to say.

Authors and their books have been inextricably linked for centuries, a pairing — much like mother and child — that’s as unavoidable as it is unconditional. Authors write books, watch them go through the editorial process (not without trepidation), and breathe a sigh of relief when they finally make it into the hands of readers, hopefully intact. The words, the story, the ideas contained between the covers of a book reflect directly back upon the author — they are the tools the author uses to express him or herself and to show us something of what it means to be human, in precisely the same way that an artist uses paint and a dancer uses movement. Stories and ideas issue from the author and reveal aspects of the author as a human being; and yet, strangely enough, by giving expression to these stories and ideas and sending them out there for others to read and critique, the author also cuts himself off from them.

This is because the book, once it is sprung upon the world, assumes an independent existence that has nothing to do with the author. In ways that are simultaneously reassuring and frightening, a book takes on a life of its own and moves beyond the author’s sphere of influence. Once the book is in the hands of a reader, it belongs to the reader, not the author. The reader is a free agent who can make whatever he or she wishes of the words and ideas found within its pages. There is no need for the reader to know or care anything about the author in order to gain insight or enjoyment from, or be puzzled, confused, or irritated by, an author’s work. In fact, I’ll go so far as to say that with regard to the act of reading, the author is a needless and irrelevant distraction.

Each reader brings to the act of reading their own experiences, assumptions, biases, and attitudes that the author can never hope to anticipate or account for in the written work. Great authors don’t even try. No author worth the few seconds it takes to flip through the pages of his book will limit himself to a specific audience, because, first, it’s formula writing (i.e., boring), and second, each reader’s experience of any given book will be unique (There are no exceptions: great writers of genre fiction transcend the genre; great children’s books captivate readers of all ages). This is one reason why good books generate discussion and debate, and great books generate passionate discussion and debate. Poor books deliver the expected, reaffirm our complacencies, and provide the sort of comfort a child derives from a familiar plaything. Great books challenge our assumptions and make us think hard about our place in the world. That said, readers approach books with a variety of goals in mind, and nobody has any right to declare one reader’s experience more valid than another’s. It all comes down to personal preference.

For the author, a new book, right out of the box, has about it an almost mystical aura. This

object I hold in my hand is the culmination of all that effort and anguish, all those balled-up scraps of paper, solitary late nights and bleary eyed mornings; all those months, even years, of waiting. Because writing a book, not to mention getting it published, is, frankly, a struggle, a torment that the author willingly inflicts upon himself and his loved ones. Anyone who tries to write a book is gripped, no doubt, by an obsessive personality and is probably a little bit crazy — undeniably selfish and conceited — and likely unreliable and moody. Writers talk to themselves and stare in wonder at things normal people pass by without a second glance. Writers will spend hours, even days, struggling to formulate a phrase or find just the right word. The payoff for all of this eccentric behavior is the finished book, some good reviews, maybe an award or two, and with luck, industry, and repeated success, an enduring place in the country’s cultural heritage. Never mind that the new book, right out of the box, will never measure up to the expectations such a harrowing process gives rise to. But it does fill in nicely for whatever misguided ideal the author had in mind.

Imagine, then, the author of the eBook. Lacking a physical object that he can sign, proudly pass around, present to friends, or point to in shop windows, how does the author of an eBook demonstrate his accomplishment and declare his worth? The question might seem absurd, even a bit silly. Because the author of an eBook can easily send friends online to see his work. He can count downloads. He can peek over the shoulder of someone studying a laptop or eBook reader screen in the hope that the person is reading his book. Publishers of eBooks keep close tabs on usage, for which the author can expect to be paid. The new readers are making access to eBooks seamless and almost instantaneous. But long after publication, months down the road, once the initial flurry of interest has passed, where does the author stand in relation to his eBook?

A printed book is a cultural artifact and, in the anthropological sense, provides clues about the society that produced it. Physical objects can endure to tell their tale. Literary lore is replete with stories of authors who wrote book after book and died unrecognized, only to have their work discovered (in an attic or on a library shelf) and reprinted and appreciated years later. Authors are terrified of obscurity, but as long as the printed book exists, there is a chance that it will be found by that elusive ideal reader.

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