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The Future of the Book: Does It Have One?

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Against the Grain

"Linking Publishers, Vendors and Librarians"

The Future of the Book: Does It Have One?

by **Mark Y. Herring** (Dean of Library Services, Dacus Library, Winthrop University) <herringm@winthrop.edu>

Extra! Extra! Read All About It: 500-Year Old Invention Fails! This throwback to yesteryear headline declaiming might yield the following in our future: Extra! Extra! Point and Click All About It! If the computer gurus have their way, this silly beginning might indeed be our end. About every year or so — these days it's more like every three months — we have new declamations about the demise of the book. With every new jump in megahertz, every new wireless laptop, we read somewhere — a library magazine here, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* there — that by golly, Ding, Dong, the book is dead. And thousands of gleeful, small-minded folks go prancing through the pages of the professional and popular literature singing its dirge.

It's hard to figure out why they are so happy. With reading skills plummeting and illiteracy rising, perhaps they are happy that with the new bar of measurement, our future benchmarks will be so much lower than before. It's a self-fulfilling prophecy in some ways. The lower the bar goes, the less

people read. The less they read, the fewer books are printed and purchased. Fewer books mean more something, possibly computers. In the end, those who control the computers will be king.

Perhaps we need not resort to conspiracy theories. It could be that books are simply too old-fashioned to make it in our hip-hip, savvy, high-tech, "my people will videoconference your people, and we must do e-lunch soon," kind of world.

After all, when you can email a toilet to someone looking for one in Hong Kong, as the commercial has it, why in the world would you want to tote something that is 500+ years old under your arm? Talk about anachronisms!

On the other hand, as Aquinas might have said, there may be another point of view. Indeed there is, and herewith are six such views. Not all have bowed the knee to electronic access, and these six stand shoulder-to-shoulder to say why. None of them is a Luddite, though that is surely what all

will be called. It is simply that each of us is certain that while the book's obituary has long since been written, it will not be printed (or posted, if you will) for some time. Too many factors impinge upon its power to wield influence over the world of reading. This gathering is by no means accidental. When the *Chronicle of Higher Education* posted a colloquy on the "death of the book" (a tidbit that followed an earlier "Deserted Libraries" foreboding), I responded as forcibly as I could that the book was not yet dead.

One must be careful what one says, for my friend Katina Strauch saw the posting and asked me to pull together some essays from others who might feel the same way. *Against the Grain* has always been on the cutting edge of free and open inquiry, so I gladly took up the challenge. The five others I commandeered to write should not be guilty by association with me; rather, they should be taken

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If Rumors Were Horses

Hope you all had a **wonderful holiday!** I am just now spending time catching up on all the Rumors that are out there in our world. It reminds me of what my fourteen-year-old son said one night when my husband and I were discussing library "gossip." (I didn't know he was listening. OOPS!) "Gee, Mom, I didn't know that kind of stuff happened in a LIBRARY!"

First up is the **Faxon/Divine/RoweCom** story. At the end of December, the listservs were tapping with rumors of financial collapse. For good coverage check out **Barbara Quint's** and **Paula Hane's Newsbreaks** <http://www.infoday.com/newsbreaks/nb021220-1.htm>.

And on Friday, December 20, notice of an **Ad Hoc Committee re RoweCom/Call for Library & Publisher Mem-**

bers was posted on **Liblicense**. Here's the full announcement—Today, December 20, 2002, an ad hoc committee (the "Committee") was formed in order to, among other things, perform investigations and analyses of the operations and financial condition of **RoweCom, Inc.** ("RoweCom") and its parent corporation, **Divine, Inc.** ("Divine"), initiate negotiations with **RoweCom** and **Divine**, and

to take such other actions that the Committee may determine are in the best interests of its constituency. The initial members of the Committee include a major research library as well as leading publishers (**Blackwell**, **Elsevier**, and **Wiley**). Going forward, committee membership is open to both publishers and li-

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and especially those with disabilities (www.cast.org). His work has involved the design and planning for the creation of a national digital library of accessible curricular materials and is now completed. He is in the process of reinvigorating his consulting practice under the name of **Electronic Publishing Associates**. EPA operates in two areas: (1) Working with scholarly, professional and education publishers to develop, evaluate, refine and implement practical electronic publishing strategies in support of their existing or planned print products or stand-alone initiatives; and (2) Working with school district and state education professionals facing the specter of litigation under federal and increasingly aggressive state laws requiring the provision of accessible curricular materials, i.e., textbooks, for the over six million students with disabilities currently in the nation's schools. In addition to helping education professionals develop accessibility plans, EPA will work directly with school publishers to help them address their customers' pressing need for accessible curricular materials.

Enjoyed talking to the vivacious **Florence Sumaray** <f_sumaray@acs.org> and **Matthew J. Price** <m_price@acs.org> from the **American Chemical Society** at the recent **Charles-ton Conference**. And watch for the bam-zowie **Bartow Culp's** <bculp@purdue.edu> upcom

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The Future of the Book: from page 1

at their word. Nothing I say here should be attributed to them.

I'm certain, too, that none of us would say that there would *never* be a time when the book will vanish. This is, after all, a culture which gave us Hollywood where, "based on the book" generally means that somewhere in some library within 100 miles of the filming, there was this book, see, and it, ... you get my meaning. This is a culture in which trial lawyers can work for more than \$6,500 an hour (but no more than \$130,000 an hour) killing off tobacco companies, yet still be able to parade about on television claiming the high moral ground. This is a culture in which Global Crossings makes a political pundit millions, yet goes bankrupt for all the rest who were counting on the income.¹ The point is, *anything* can happen, so none of us would be willing to contend that the book will forever be.

What we will contend, however, is that the book is a far cry from dead. We don't even believe it's valetudinarian. Rather we see it as robust and vibrant and ready to live another 100 years being, as **Amy Lowell** once said, "our essence and quintessence." We are none of us prophets but we are all eager to see this Nostradamian prediction come true. So, who are we, alphabetically speaking?

Sidney Berger is the Director of the **California Center for the Book**. **Mr. Berger** holds, in addition to a library science degree, a PhD from **Iowa**. **Berger** contends that while there is much to commend electronic access, it still has a few bugs, so to say, that prevent it from being the new panacea to all research ills. He praises the book's portability and more, its intellectually pleasing charm. While he praises electronic access with respect to journal accessibility, he also points out some of the inherent problems that every librarian agonizes over: the instability of it all.

Edwin S. Gleaves is the State Librarian and Archivist of Tennessee. **Ed** and I met about twenty-five years ago, when I signed up for one of his classes while working on my library degree. **Mr. Gleaves** points out that we have been through all of this before and the library has remained. Books have remained. Reading has endured. Moreover, we are in the middle of a renaissance of book publishing of late, the most obvious of which is the resurgence of reading among the young with the publication of the *Harry Potter* books. For **Ed**, the book may die a few more dozen times before it really passes away.

In addition to his library science degree, **David Mash** holds degrees from **Southern Methodist University** and **Dallas Theological Seminary**. It will come as no surprise then that he holds the chief library chair at **Columbia International University**, a small school devoted to Christian teaching. **Mr. Mash** points to the future of the book as anything but ill, yet he sees rather formidable problems on the horizon, not least of which are the many errors of the Web coupled with its Soviet-like disinformation.

David Oberhelman is the Humanities and Social Sciences Librarian at the Edmon Low Library at **Oklahoma State University**. **Mr. Oberhelman** holds degrees from the Universities of **California (Irvine)**, **Pittsburgh**, and **Rice**. He tackles the question on the very ground where electronic access should be its strongest: searching. If electronic access can be found to be faulty here, *a fortiori*, it can be found faulty throughout. What **Mr. Oberhelman** evinces so clearly is that even at its strongest point, the Internet, the World Wide Web and all the rest do have serious shortfalls that the unwary ignore at their peril.²

Allene Stuart Phy-Olsen is professor extraordinaire at **Austin Peay University** in Tennessee. **Professor Phy-Olsen** has written extensively, including titles in the ever-useful **Twayne Series** of authors. **Professor Phy-Olsen** envisions a brighter future for the Web if it will only use its full resources. The Web simply cannot compete against that arena in which it has no standing. She sees an interactive future that will give eBooks the advantages they have been touting for so many years but have yet to deliver. If this comes to reality, **Professor Phy-Olsen** sees the potential for the web as stronger in this area, rather than in one it cannot win: print. Meanwhile, however, she's more than ever at home with endless ineffability of words on paper.

Jim Presgraves is the antiquarian book dealer, *par excellence*. **Mr. Presgraves**, in addition to being unflappable, maintains one of the wryest and engaging senses of humor I have ever had the pleasure of encountering. In addition to his myriad yarns, **Mr. Presgraves** also has one of the finest book dealerships I have been able to find. We have been doing business for more than two decades and, try though I may, I have yet to be unhappy with the outcome. If you need to buy a used or rare book, **Jim** (and his **Bookworm & Silverfish**) is your man. **Mr. Presgraves'** concerns have to do with the art form called the book as opposed to its functionality as a tool of learning. Though he is concerned with both, he points out what may not be so obvious: all those rare materials we look at longingly will be even more breath-taking when they are replaced by laptops under glass.

Finally, there has been one other person who must be singled out. I have the uncanny good fortune to have hired a retired English teacher who acts as the Secretary to the Dean. **Bessie Meeks** has done as much editing on these essays as I have, and more. Her proofreading skills are *sine qua non*, and while she cannot be faulted for anything I have said, she has made everything all of us have tried to say in these essays so much the better. 🌿

Endnotes

1. Incidentally, Terry McAuliffe remains the head of the Democratic National Committee, "the party of the people" after his \$100,000 investment in Global Crossings made him \$18 million before going bankrupt. See www.timeswrs.com/V020902.HTM for more.
2. Technically speaking the Internet and the World Wide Web are two different species of the same or similar beast.