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The Great Debate: An Introduction to the 2nd Exploring Acquisitions Conference

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Against the Grain

"Linking Publishers, Vendors and Librarians"

The Great Debate: An Introduction to the 2nd Exploring Acquisitions Conference

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Guest Editors' Note: *Rick Anderson, Sue McKnight, and Alice Keller spoke at the 2nd Exploring Acquisitions Conference held April 15-17, 2009, in Oxford, England. They have offered us the gracious opportunity to issue their own written versions of their presentations. Additional papers from the conference will be included in subsequent volumes of Against the Grain. Following are Rick Anderson's "Managing Multiple Models of Publishing in Library Acquisitions," a thought provoking paper on the current state of publishing models that he presented at the conference. Another excerpt is Sue McKnight's short essay examining the very nature of a book "Is the Book Dead? Reminiscences from the Great Debate." And finally, Alice Keller's "The Perfect Library," which explores the concept of the "perfect library" — its articulation in history, literature, and within the context of current technologies.*

But first **Robin and Steve** present *"The Great Debate: An Introduction to the 2nd Exploring Acquisitions Conference,"* a small piece that summarizes the centerpiece debate of the conference.

On the afternoon of April 16, 2009, in the Oxford Union, two teams squared off in "Great Debate" to argue the current state of the book. "The house believes the book is dead" was the pronouncement from the floor and opened this rhetorical challenge. The statement is short but profound, challenging as it is ambiguous. Simple on the surface, it is a complex topic that is currently testing both the library and publishing worlds. At issue is a web of questions: what is a book? Is it the intellectual content found within or is it contingently defined by it being a paper and clothbound object? Are print books doomed — pushed aside by the ease of downloading

files onto portable eBook readers and other hand-held devices? Or, are books, clearly one of humankind's finest achievements, here to stay? These questions are pertinent for librarians and book publishers, and they are significant to any contention regarding the demise of the book. These questions also served as the backdrop for much of the on-stage and off-stage discussion at the **Exploring Acquisitions Conference**.

On one side of the debate were two Canadian librarians, **Melody Burton** and **Pam Ryan**, who argued that we may not have attended the funeral, but the book is most definitely dead. In opposition, **Bryan Ward-Perkins** and **Richard Fisher**, two of our Oxford hosts,

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If Rumors Were Horses

Among the big topics this month is the exclusive fulltext rights licensing of content of **Time, Inc.** titles by **EBSCO**. There have been several posts to the **ATG NewsChannel** (www.against-the-grain.com/). **Library Journal** has posted a page that pulls together much of the relevant information. <http://www.libraryjournal.com/article/CA6716858.html?nid=2673&source=title&rid=17202558>

And we will have an interview with **Patrick C. Sommers** of **Gale** in the April **ATG**. Watch for it.

The second big topic regards the pricing of **eBooks** brought to a head, so to speak, by the unveiling of the **iPad**. Y'all probably know more about it than I. Anyway, **Amazon** pulled **Macmillan** titles be-

cause they would not agree to **Amazon's** mandatory \$9.99 eBook price. Meanwhile, **Apple** was allowing pricing of \$12-15 per eBook distributed through its new **iBookstore** and readable on the **iPhone** or **iPad**. And there are more and more competitors. Seems like every other person these days has the new **Google Nexus One** and **Google** is also planning on opening a bookstore. And that's not all by any means. The landscape changes minute-by-minute. Seems that in the short-term at least, **Amazon** will allow publishers to set prices for their eBooks, so gone is the \$9.99 price. We have covered a lot of this on the **ATG NewsChannel** and I hope that you are all subscribers and reading and participating!!

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maintained the book is not only still alive it is thriving in its old age. Vendors, publishers, librarians and scholars were among the audience. Who better to take part in debating whether the very foundation of libraries, the printed book itself, was extinct? To that end, many conference attendees stood to proclaim the printed book obsolete, or honor and defend the besieged monograph.

The debate was not only an impassioned ceremony, deliberations surrounding the announcement of the book's death served as the center issue to the conference itself. It is meaningful that the conference was held in a center place of Western and book culture, Oxford, England. This debate is not novel. Many in both the library and publishing worlds have explored and attempted to predict what effects a widespread demand for eBooks will have on the book, the publishing industry, and libraries. This same debate took place in the pages of the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* — and yes, the articles were published both in print and electronic versions. In 2006, **Kevin Kelly** of *Wired* magazine wrote a piece entitled "Scan this Book!" in which he celebrates the **Google** scanning project and the implications of having the content of entire research libraries available in digitized format.¹ **Kelly** speculates that the "universal library" is now a possibility, "to have in one place all knowledge, past and present. All books, all documents, all conceptual works, in all languages." **Kelly** then reminds us that the portability of eBooks is but one of their great assists, that the real value of eBook technology is its ability via links and tags to reconfigure intellectual works by appropriating and reassembling text and information in new ways "as each word in each book is cross-linked, clustered, cited, extracted, indexed, analyzed, annotated, remixed, reassembled and woven deeper into the culture than ever before." By linking "snippets" of information to one another, **Kelly** claims this will create "a single liquid fabric of interconnected words and ideas," but how this staggering matrix of information would impact publishers and the model for publishing books is unclear yet conceivably earth-shattering.

Arguing against **Kelly** and his utopian vision of eBooks and the whole notion of "snippets" of information and the deconstruction of the printed book rose **John Updike**, the late author and print book lover. Speaking at a large exposition of booksellers, **Updike**

reacted to **Kelly's** article by commenting tongue-in-cheek that, "the book revolution, which from the Renaissance on taught men and women to cherish and cultivate their individuality, threatens to end in a sparkling pod of snippets."² Aghast at **Kelly's** contention that the entire author-publishing model was doomed, **Updike** concluded a rather irascible tirade with, "so, booksellers defend your lonely forts. Keep your edges dry. Your edges are our edges." The book convention attendees greeted **Updike's** defense of the book with rousing cheers. The Great Debate audience would have cheered him as well, judging from the majority of support it gave the book both before and after the debate. However, **Updike** would have been surprised and likely saddened that our debate produced more converts for the book's burial than its vitality.

That the golden era and primacy of the printed book has surely passed has been put forth by many, including the team of **Burton** and **Ryan**. As they reminded us, "news goes on but the newspaper is dead; remember Beta vs. VHS? Today it's all about content. We put our library books in storage, away from the space we make for computers and study spaces." If this viewpoint may seem threatening to print book devotees and to the print publishing industry, perhaps it is because the observations ring so true. New technologies have conquered the limitations of print. Supporters of **Burton** and **Ryan** gleefully described the research efficiencies, metadata, and content connections eBooks provide users, and championed portable eBook readers and handheld devices that can download and store hundreds of titles. The eBook aficionados also cited the inflexible nature and physical inferiority of print publications as compared to the electronic text. **Burton** concluded "we are probably the last generation who were taught with books as the centerpiece. Printed books will be archived. Recycled print is the future of the book."

Taking the contrary and perhaps the more emotional view, others argued heatedly for the vitality of print books and observed their sales continue to climb. **Ward-Perkins** conceded that online content has its merits but nevertheless defended the print book, "given e-content is as good or superior in short measures; but books are superior when you have to immerse yourself into a complex relationship... if I want to find out when **Thomas Paine** wrote something, going online is definitely the way to go; but if I want to read **Thomas Paine**, I want the book... and I don't want to interact with it or with others giving me their opinions of **Paine**... there's too much of that anyway."

Many in the audience stood to support the printed book and pecked away at the seemingly formidable eBook, noting that you cannot curl up in bed with an eBook, nor take an eBook to the bath, and that reading online is tiring to the eyes. **Ward-Perkins'** defense of the book ended with the droll summation, "books are durable, you can skim through them, go back and forth, which is how people read. With eBooks you must scroll. Need I remind you, books replaced scrolls; and what is an eBook reader, but simply a glorified scroll."

Burton and **Ryan** may have won the debate on a technical knockout by swaying more converts than did the team of **Ward-Perkins** and **Fisher**, but what we really learned from the many conference presentations and ensuing discussions, and from the Great Debate itself, is that regardless of our individual stance on its health or demise, the book is evolving. In hindsight, both sides of the debate emerged as victors of a sort because there are plenty of readers for both mediums, and this readership need not be mutually exclusive. **Kelly** summarizes the issue as such, "the least important, but most discussed, aspects of digital reading have been these contentious questions: Will we give up the highly evolved technology of ink on paper and instead read on cumbersome machines? Or will we keep reading our paperbacks on the beach? For now, the answer is yes to both."

At **Oxford**, we too came to this conclusion. What we discovered at the end of our round of lively examinations and disputes is that the book is dead but it is also very much alive. If you take the stand that the book is defined by its intellectual content, not its container, then that content in electronic form is very much a book. However, what happens to this argument when you consider the recombination and linking of "snippets" that **Kelly** describes and the changed role of the reader? In this context, is the content still a book? If you believe that the book is defined by its container — the printed page — your beloved object may be in trouble, but this does not mean the book does not deserve our reverence and our support. At the booksellers convention, **Updike** stated this about printed books and their value, "for some of us, books are intrinsic to our human identity." Thus, the Oxford debate, much like the **Kelly** vs. **Updike** quarrel, brought us to a conclusion that was summarized best by **Jean-Claude Guedon** from the gallery in the Oxford Union: "the book is dead, long live the book!" 🍷

Rumors from page 6

tor of North American Sales and **David** was Vice President of Sales & Marketing. **Robin** joined **EBL** in November as **Vice President of Business Development**. Besides working with customers, she will be working to bring product improvement to market. **Robin** has an MLS, is a columnist for *Against the Grain*,

and is active in various **ALA** discussion groups. Much of her past work has been in library technical services. **David** is **Vice President of Sales & Marketing** and he joined **EBL** in January at **ALA** in Boston. He too will work with customers directly, and he will help **EBL** to reach new parts of the market as well as expand strategic partnerships. I didn't know that **David** has a **Ph.D. in English and taught technical writing for many years**. Prior to his

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Endnotes

1. **Kevin Kelly**, "Scan This Book!" *New York Times Magazine*, May 14, 2006, accessed on April 26, 2009 at <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/05/14/magazine/14publishing.html?ex=1305259200&en=c07443d368771bb8&ei=5090>.
2. **Bob Thompson**, "Explosive Words: At BookExpo America, Publishing's Digital Wave Crashes Against a Literary Pillar," *Washington Post*, May 22, 2006, accessed on April 26, 2009 at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/05/21/AR2006052101349.html>.