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The End of Books and the Death of Libraries

by Matthew J. Bruccoli (President, Bruccoli Clark Layman; Phone: 803-771-4642; Fax: 803-799-6593)

Samuel Johnson rightly decreed that “The chief glory of every people arises from its authors.” It follows that the chief glory of every people is perpetuated in its books, which are to be found in libraries.

I was trained during the Fifties by John Cook Wyllie, the Curator of Rare Books at the University of Virginia’s Alderman Library and subsequently head of the library. He was the best librarian and the best bookman I have ever known. Everything I believe about libraries; everything I know about books; everything I have accomplished as a bibliographer, publisher, editor, biographer, and book collector, I owe to Mr. Wyllie’s tutelage. Accordingly, I reasonably require librarians at research institutions to emulate his standards and values.

I have worked for two men who qualified: Hyman Kritzer — the head of the Kent State University Libraries, who was a courageous acquisitions librarian and research-collection builder — and George Terry — Dean of Libraries at the University of South Carolina, who had a vision of what a research library should be and do. The party ended when I lost George.

It is appropriate for me to note my respect for two librarians I did not work for: Charles Mann, the Curator of Rare Books at Penn State, and William Cagle, head of the Lilly Library at Indiana University. My bookman heroes include Charles Feinberg, the great Walt Whitman scholar-collector (“Without books my life would have been a desert.”) and my partner, Frazer Clark, who pauperized himself collecting Nathaniel Hawthorne. Neither Charlie nor Frazer was a librarian or an academician; but their monumental collections are now in libraries.

I have declared my allegiances and acknowledged my obligations to prepare for my statement that books — books for study, books for research, books for reference — are imperiled. Even books for reading pleasure — which is where it all starts — are under threat of superannuation, or worse. Nicholson Baker’s “The Author vs. the Library” (The New Yorker, 14 October 1996), which deals with the pillaging of the San Francisco Public Library, ought to be mandatory reading for library users.

Books consist of bound printed pages. Books are not images on a screen. Therefore libraries — buildings full of common books, uncommon books, rare and precious books, worthless books, and people using them — are endangered. Without books, libraries will perish because they have no reason to exist without books. They will become buildings full of television screens and expensive electronic junk — and that attraction is diminishing as potential library patrons find it unnecessary to set foot in them. Fred Kilgour, a god of librarianship, wrote, “Not having to go to a library is a very important improvement in providing library service.” He was not joking. There is now a population of college students who never enter their college libraries. To encourage students’ non-dependence on libraries is to betray them. The book is the most useful and usable learning instrument ever invented. If Johann Gutenberg were to produce the first book printed from movable type next week, it would be hailed as a miracle; and Microsoft would become a division of Gutenberg, Inc.

I once felt secure in the conviction that libraries would last. I was certain that the book-haters and book-dopes would be prevented from destroying the books and the libraries. Now I’m not sure: I fear that they will destroy or discard the books before they go to librarian paradise where they will never have to see a book. I was amused the first time I heard a librarian or information specialist or whatever she called herself, cheerfully — maybe triumphantly — speak the phrase “virtual library.” I should have wept. The virtual librarians have embraced virtual books. Those electronic things on a screen are not books. They don’t work the way books work. They aren’t as good as books. On-screen matter does not allow for sustained reading. The universal virtual library will destroy reading techniques. Reading will become an anti-social act, as Ray Bradbury predicted in Fahrenheit 451. Public libraries — real libraries with real books — will be replaced by bookcasies, where readers go to read books in secret.

A virtual library is just that. Without real libraries and real books, there will be a lot of unemployed librarians — er, information specialists. I do not know why librarians are eager to collaborate in the destruction of their profession by means of their ecstatic participation in the destruction of that irreplaceable research instrument, the card catalogue, and their orgiastic discarding of books and newspaper runs. A newspaper on screen is not a newspaper: it doesn’t work the same way; it is not read the same way. The make-up and the page lay-out doesn’t work the same way; it is not read the same way. The virtual librarians have embraced virtual books. Those electronic microfilms are breaking down — and then there will be nothing. See Nicholson Baker’s noble Double Fold (NY: Random House, 2001).

Nothing can be more important than a book. Nothing can replace a real library. Nothing can duplicate or substitute for the excitement and intellectual stimulation of being in a building full of books. Nothing can replicate the experience of walking the stacks and seeing the books and touching the books and listening to them: “Me, me! Read me!” Here is young Thomas Wolfe in the stacks of Harvard’s Widener Library:

Now he would prowl the stacks of the library at night, pulling books out of a thousand shelves and reading in them like a madman. The thought of these vast stacks of books would drive him mad: the more he

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Report by Ramune Kubilius (Northwestern University, Galter Health Sciences Library) <r-kubilius@northwestern.edu>

Presenter Worlock (“we Worlocks are warriers”) rebounded from being unable to retrieve his PowerPoint “futurology” presentation slides, by telling the audience he had been “liberated” from PPT. Moving on briskly, he contended that the root problem is too much content. Metadata is the world we live in. Information is available for machine-to-machine linkages. In 2020, there will be no open access since there will be an assumption of access. There will be no copyright, since everyone will use the clickable license. There will be no “journals,” just trackable information events (but Nature, Science and Cell will still exist). There will be no “publishers,” only “value added service providers.” There will be no librarians, only “information support professionals.” Worlock contended that there isn’t enough research on research (behavior). STM is now small-team oriented, but is becoming “big science”, with large teams at multiple sites, and in 2020, enabled searches will allow “show me scientists making similar claims.” Indexing and abstracts will be a given. Three publishers will sell value-added technology and proprietary indexation in their lifelong personal ELN (electronic lap notebook) environments that will be checked and certified twice a year. Because of compliance requirements, no research projects will be initiated without informatics associates. The 2006 “semantic Web” in 2020 will just be “searching.”

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read, the less he seemed to know — the
greater the number of the books he read, the
greater the immense uncountable number of
those which he could never read would seem to be.
Within a period of ten years he read at least 20,000
volumes — deliberately the number is
set low — and opened the pages and
looked through many times that
number. This may seem unbelievable, but it
happened. Dryden said this about Ben
Jonson: “Other men read books but he
reads libraries” — and so now it was with
this boy. Yet this terrific orgy of the
books brought him no comfort, peace, or
wisdom of the mind and heart. Instead,
his fury and despair increased from what
they fed upon, his hunger mounted with the
food it ate.
He read insanely, by the hundreds, the
thousands, the ten thousands, yet he had
no desire to be bookish; no one could
describe this mad assault upon print as
scholarly: a ravening appetite in him de-
scribed this mad assault upon print as
— the thought that other books were
waiting for him tore at his heart forever.
He pictured himself as tearing the entrails
from a book as from a fowl.
At first, hovering over book stalls, or
walking at night among the vast shelves
of the library, he would read, watch in
hand, muttering to himself in triumph or
anger at the timing of each page: “Fifty
seconds to do that one. Damn you,
you’ll see! You will, will you?” — and
he would tear through the next page in
twenty seconds.
This fury which drove him on to read
so many books had nothing to do
with scholarship, nothing to do with
academic honors, nothing to do with
formal learning. He was not in any way
a scholar and did not want to be one.
He simply wanted to know about ev-
everything on earth; he wanted to devour
the earth, and it drove him mad when
he saw he could not do this. [Of Time
and the River].
This is exemplary behavior to be emu-
lated. 8
The stacks of a good library provide a bet-
ter education than is available in classrooms.
Frequently the book you really need is the
one you don’t know about until you find it
shelved near the book you went there to get.
My Yale education was incomplete because the
library stacks were closed to undergradu-
ates — although it had a card catalogue. The
September–October 2006 issue of the Yale
Alumni Magazine carries this item:
Technology chased a few pieces of Yale
history out the front door of Sterling
Memorial Library this year. In two
phases in March and July, the library
removed and sold the 80 freestanding
cabinets that once housed the card cata-
alog in the nave. Yale students, faculty,
and employees were offered a chance
to buy the cabinets for $50 each on a
first-come, first-served basis. (They
went fast.) The built-in cabinets in the
nave are staying where they are, at
least for now. The cards themselves will
be stored in the basement of Sterling
and will be accessible to researchers.
[Wanna bet?]
I got most of my education in the open
stacks at UVa, and Mr. Wylie granted me the
freedom of the rare-book stacks. The rest
of my education I acquired in used or antiquar-
ian bookstores by handling books and buying
them. I never paid too much for a book. There
were books I failed to buy because I thought
that I couldn’t afford them, but I was wrong.
It was cowardice.
Biographer Edmund Morris has testified
to what books mean to a bookman — not book
fetishism but book love.
What I’ll miss in the virtual book is more of
what I miss already:
the feel of a printed volume as something
that has gone primal. Literally, that used to
mean a construct of board, thread, and paper
— and the thought that other books were
waiting for him tore at his heart forever.
He pictured himself as tearing the entrails
from a book as from a fowl.
If I have conveyed the misleading impres-
sion that all the book-enemies at
OSU and other institutions congregated in the
libraries, I hereby stipulate that many of the worst of-
fenders were on the faculty: fakes, frauds, and
incompetents who didn’t know or care anything
about the books in their fields — or any books
at all — and were proud of their anti-bookish-
ness. Consequently they were unable to advise
the librarians about acquisitions — which is a
scholar’s responsibility.
One of them who became chairman of the
English Department angrily told me, “No book
is worth $300!” The one who taught the course
on “The Art of Literary Research” — some
art — condescendingly referred to the text of
“The Gift Outright” that Robert Frost read from at the Kennedy Inauguration as a “mere
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collector’s item.” Hy Kritzer and I bought it for the library, anyhow.

A book evokes the circumstances, culture, and society that inspired it, produced it, and utilized it. It is not a “mere artifact” or a “mere collector’s item”; beware of the mere-sayers. Great copies of great books don’t work on tellly.

When William Cagle was head of the Lilly Library at Indiana University he enjoyed showing students the first printing of the Bill of Rights with a transmittal note:

“The President of the United States requests the Secretary of State to accept this volume of laws.”

Nothing can replace examining this book that George Washington presented to Thomas Jefferson. Or F. Scott Fitzgerald’s annotated copy of Ulysses with a presentation letter from James Joyce at the University of South Carolina. They are eloquent monuments of history, learning, and culture. Seeing them and touching them educates serious students in ways that nothing else can.

Library books are not enough. It is obligatory for educated readers to own books and to live surrounded by them. The sight of them comforts us. The annotations in your own books are more than study aids: they provide records of your taste, enthusiasms, and intellectual development — a way to resuscitate the reading experiences that shaped your mind and your life.

The destruction of books and runs of newspapers are not just crimes committed out of ignorance. The culprits are book-enemies, and they say so. I have worked with and fought against book-haters who were and still are in charge of research libraries. They are easy to identify: just look at the shelves in their offices or visit their bookless homes. Observe their behavior in a room full of books: they never look at the books, and they avoid contact with books to protect themselves from contamination.

One good thing that may result from the digitization of books is that a lot of information specialists will have to acquire the training and education to function as librarians. When the administrators and electronic junkies replace libraries with bookless buildings stocked with screens, the librarians who select the books for scanning and preservation will become essential people in the profession. They will be trained to recognize editions, impressions, issues, and states. Not only will they know how to use a Bowersian bibliography, they will be expected to compile bibliographies. The new breed of librarians will have the responsibility for protecting and preserving our cultural possessions. “Keeper,” the old-fashioned term for curator, will recover its meaning. The rare-book rooms and special-collections departments that survive the book-purge concomitant with the scanning pandemic will become increasingly precious cultural resources: not for display, but for use. Rare-book collections — including manuscripts, letters, documents — are irreplaceable for scholarship and research.

At the crack of doom there will be library administrators convening committee meetings and generating reports on “Librarian Value of Service Outsourcing: Results of Stepwise Regression Analysis.” But the authentic librarians will be irreplaceable. Their profession will be elevated. Great needs and great opportunities exist for the book professionals to restore bookmanship to its primacy in research libraries. In 1966 Fredson Bowers — under whom I studied — delivered his address on Bibliography & Modern Librarianship at the Berkeley School of Librarianship and the UCLA School of Library Service. After observing that “It is odd that of all forms of librarianship, the training of the rare-book librarian has been most neglected,” he stated that “the only true source for fresh research on the frontiers of knowledge lies in the special collections housed in the rare-books division, and every scholar knows it.” I’m not sure what every scholar knows in the computer age; but forty years later Bowers’ prediction that properly-trained rare-book librarians would become increasingly necessary is now timely: “if the rare-book librarians do not protect the more innocent students and scholars of the future from the snares of microfilm or its successors, who will?” The successors to microfilm are now here, and they scare the hell out of me.

Millions of books will be discarded or destroyed after they are scanned or digitized or googled. I’ll be damned if I believe that they will be preserved and made available. The lucky ones will end up in inaccessible warehouses. Most will become landfill. The books that survive the massacre because of their monetary value or rarity will be entrusted to the care of the properly educated librarians who know why the books are there.

The destroyers of books justify their crimes by invoking the shibboleth duplication: “How can we shelve new books unless we get rid of old books?” Easy: build bigger libraries with more stacks to accommodate the duplicates that may or may not be duplicates. Mr. Wylie taught me that a duplicate copy of a book is not a duplicate until proven by bibliographical examination to be a duplicate. Even then, two copies are better than one. This rule obviously applies to pre-1850 books — before machine type-setting and machine printing. But concealed printings with textual variants abound in 20th-century books: there may be five concealed printings in the first edition of The Old Man and the Sea (1952). A lot of “duplicates” are needed to identify the true dupes. And what about the variants in the pre-book texts of Old Man in the regional editions of Life Magazine: the ones that libraries discarded as duplicates?

The book-enemies claim that scanning books preserves them. But they are not preserving the books: they are replacing them. Most books do not require electronic preservation. They will last if they are kept dry. It is not true that paper is oxidizing itself to death and crumbling on the shelves. This lie is a con promulgated by the people who manufacture and sell machines to libraries. Microfilm, the once-celebrated panacea, has proven to be susceptible to self-destruction. Paper is more stable than hard drives or CDs. Newspapers were customarily destroyed during the act of filmimg them or discarded as unwanted duplicates. Now there are no copies of the real thing.

More money goes into library administration than goes into book acquisition. The university administrators don’t want to squander money on books; they don’t even want libraries to have books. A university president told me that his trustees didn’t want to “waste money on pieces of old paper.” He shared their position. In 1992 30% of library budgets was spent on technology. The figure is much higher now because the 1992 technology requires updating, replacement, and remedial software. That means less money for book acquisitions and, indeed, for librarians.

The universal library of digitally scanned books is not a library; it is a lot of electronic hardware and software. A library has books: common books and rare books, valuable books and worthless books, books that are frequently used and books that haven’t been used in decades. The function of a library is to have the books there when somebody needs them.

In 2006 the New York Times Magazine gave prominent space to the cover article “Scan the Book!” by Kevin Kelly (an editor of Wired, an online “magazine”) extolling the forthcoming miraculous universal library. He promised that “when books are digitized…The universal library becomes one very, very, very large single text: the world’s only book.” That ought to scare the hell out of every reader. But I am not as frightened as I should be because Kelly’s figures are haywire. He states that 75% of the books now in libraries are “orphaned” — a term that means an out-of-print book that is still in copyright. Nonsense. He further alleges that “about 15 percent of all books are in the public domain” (email to M.J.B.). Nonsense compounded. Mr. Kelly predicts that the UL will lead to “virtual bookselves,” described by him as “a collection of texts, some as short as a paragraph, others as long as entire books…. Indeed, some authors will begin to write books to be read as snippets or to be remixed as pages.” He’s celebrating the death of literature and maybe the death of authorship. Kelly predicts that this snippitization of writing will change the economics of authorship from income earned by book sales to money earned by “performances, sponsorship, periodic subscriptions…” There is nothing good about that announcement — even if I believed it. The writer’s task is to write — not to peddle himself. There are things wrong about American copyright that require correction. But these deluded electricians want to abdicate copyright and thereby undermine the profession of authorship.

It is necessary to support authors by purchasing their work. Authors cannot live on continued on page 73
library sales, even if the United States had a public lending right to provide minuscule royalties based on library circulation. The Websites are intentionally eroding the concept of copyright; but until copyright becomes unenforceable, readers who can afford it have the obligation to support the writers who perform the world’s most precious work. Mark Twain understated it: “...almost the most prodigious asset of a country, and perhaps its most precious possession, is its native literary product — when that product is fine and noble and enduring.”

The eBook has been resurrected as the SONY Portable Reader System at $350, which provides a screen on which one page at a time can be read. The sales pitch is that an ebook stores multiple book texts (80 at present), each of which is replaceable for the price of a real book. Purportedly, “the top six trade publisher were working with SONY to make more than 10,000 titles available.” Lunacy.

When I asked the SONY demonstrator what the chief advantage of thePRS was, she explained that it obviates the need to own 80 books. I want to own 80 books. I want 8,000 books.

I welcome one product from the world of gimmicks and gadgets: on-demand books. Short runs of new books can now be rapidly and affordably printed or reprinted, allowing writers to become authors. Publication is the essential act of authorship. Out-of-print books can be resuscitated and slow-sellers can be kept in print as needed. I am referring to books — those things that open on three sides and are filled with pieces of paper covered with little black marks: books, not screens.

As head of Brucoli Clark Layman, the producer of 375 volumes to date of the Dictionary of Literary Biography for Thomson Gale, I am particularly concerned about the impending death of reference books. Books for entertainment will last, but the reference book is terminal. The death-bed is surrounded by librarians, teachers, and even putative publishers who are yakking out the life-support tubes. The college reference librarians blame the teachers for failing to make library research assignments. The pusillanimous teachers claim that their students refuse to go to the library — as though that merits condemnation. Now she has embarked on the abolition of scholarly standards.

Scholar-teacher-poet Catharine Brosman has identified the threats built into the impending onlinitization of literature (letter to M.J.B.):

What today’s Internet pushers and their librarian-converts are doing is somewhat less than book-burning, as surely they would not entirely different from it. They propose to limit increasingly the number of tangible volumes to which we, whether ordinary readers or seasoned scholars and thinkers, have access, by reducing shelf space for books in favor of computer stations, thus necessitating getting rid of old, “useless” volumes, and inviting — often “obliging” us — to look up things in the new forms they impose, whose topics and range they will decide. That which is deemed useful, up-to-date, and popular will remain available; more esoteric and less timely materials will be increasingly difficult to obtain; and the public presumption will be that what is not on-line will be ipso facto inferior or negligible. It is likely that certain older books or writings by eccentrics or “unreconstructed” thinkers, judged dangerous or offensive, will be excluded from electronic reproduction on grounds of their contents; isn’t conversion of a book library to an on-line imitation a perfect chance for the speech-and-thought police to rid America of texts expressing views deemed outdated, irresponsible, offensive, inflammatory, or in language now banned? Just as one computer dictionary rules out, I’m told, the word “nincompoop,” judged offensive, presumably.

Who will determine which books will be online and which will be suppressed? The Handicapper-General will.

In his article acknowledging his debts to the Chicago Public Library, David Mamet observes that “The computer presents itself as a tool of increased literacy and communication. The jury is out. It may very well prove, in retrospect, to have been the death of literacy and communication, for if information can be centrally controlled (and it seems that it can), it can and most probably will be altered” (American Libraries, December 2006).

The Dictionary of Literary Biography is not as good online as it is inbook. The volumes were conceived as volumes: that’s the way they work. A proper reference book is planned and ordered, organized and structured. The elements are integrated. Loose entries on telly are grab-bags. Moreover, the online DLB entries omit the illustrations, which are functional, not decorative: the facsimiles of manuscripts, revised typescripts, and corrected proofs have spiritual and instructional value. The best DLB volumes, the Documentary volumes, don’t work online.

Yes — I know that online reference material can be instantly updated or corrected. Some is and some isn’t. I can’t tell. Subscribing librarians pay a Website maintenance fee, but I don’t know what they get for it. Moreover, I’m tired of being told that thanks to Websites students can write their papers at 3 AM without going to the library — as though that merits commendation. At 3 AM they don’t do research: they plagiarize. How many students really do consult online resources at three in the morning? Even if there are a lot of them, they should not be encouraged in their dereliction. They belong in the library using books, browsing in books, marking books, mutilating books, and getting an education.

Books are at risk because reading is at risk. Students don’t read books or anything else — probably because their teachers don’t require or expect much reading from them. Students are losing the ability to write, because they don’t read. Instead of suppressing book reading and discouraging library use, educators — including librarians — should herd students to the library. At gun-point, if necessary.

A college or university is a collection of books surrounded by students, teachers, and scholars using them. In the fifties, Catholic tourists at Yale University were observed crossing themselves when they entered the gothic Sterling Memorial Library. God was in the books then; but He went to library school.

Nothing can be more important than a book. Get the books. Preserve the books. Revere the books.

Notes
1. Dr. Johnson compiled his Dictionary of English Language without a computer. He read many books and retained what he had read.
2. The Hawthorne-Lelongfellow Library at Bowdoin College declined Frazer Clark’s unmatched Hawthorne collection on the alibi of “too much duplication.” A great research collection can never be duplicated.
3. Bill Gates bought his DaVinci Codex for 30.8 million dollars. Does he know something he isn’t telling us?
4. Bradbury has written: “You must read dreadful dumb books and glorious books, and let them wrestle in beautiful fights inside your head — vulgar one moment, brilliant the next. You must lurk in libraries and climb the stacks like ladders to sniff books like perfumes and wear books like hats upon your crazy heads.”
5. See Nicholson Baker, “Discards.” continued on page 74
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6. Tom Wolfe — the other one — has described library stacks as “the stored memory of a civilization.”

7. Librarians routinely instruct binderies to cut out the front-and-back matter — which may include reviews — when binding literary and scholarly journals, in order to save shelf space. This criminal act includes the journal covers.

8. One of the library administrators I fought was a carpet fetishist. His office shelves had carpet swatches — not books — and he spoke passionately about the library carpeting. The late Mayme Agnew Clayton, librarian at USC and UCLA, spent her own money building her collection of African-American material that included 30,000 books, the world’s largest collection of 16-mm films made by blacks, 75,000 photos, and “tens of thousands” of documents and manuscripts. That is exemplary conduct to be emulated by good librarians. Yet Ms. Clayton did not arrange for placing her collection in a library (The New York Times, 14 December 2006).

9. A DLB editorial board member has been donating the volumes to the Rutland, Vermont, public library for a decade. On 19 July 2006 he received this message from librarian Paula Baker: “We are trimming down our reference collection in a very large way this year and will not be able to collect future volumes in the Gale literature series.” She didn’t even get the title right. Her note was written on a card with the printed slogan Get Connected!

10. On 25 October 2006 the Thomson Corporation announced that it was selling Thomson Learning — including Gale Research — in order to get out of the library reference book business. CEO Richard Harrington stated: “After the sale of Thomson Learning, the vast majority of our sales will come from electronic products and services with recurring revenues that are currently growing at high rates.” Is that what reference librarians want? The bidding starts at five billion dollars in January 2007. 

The bidding starts at five billion dollars in January 2007. 

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