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for the World"

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**Museum of the Cherokee Indian,
Cherokee, North Carolina.** (Photo by Candy Moulton)

Western Writers of America
ROUNDUP®

M A G A Z I N E

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Brave New World:

The State of Publishing in the Twenty-First Century

By Clay Reynolds

In the late autumn of 1861, a company of the U.S. Cavalry was sitting around a campfire, drinking whiskey, swapping tales, and generally avoiding action, when a wagon arrived. It carried copies of a new type of book tightly bundled in wire bales. The title was *Maleska; or, The Indian Wife of the White Hunter*, by Sophie Winterbotham Stephens, published by the firm, Beadle and Adams. The novelettes were cheaply printed on thin newsprint and bound in an ugly orange wrapper with a garish, provocative illustration; the quartermaster had procured thousands of copies for distribution to military camps throughout the mostly idle Army of the Potomac.

Although Winterbotham was a well-known writer and editor, this was a new venue for her, or for anyone. It was a complete, self-contained book that cost far less than any complete volume. It sold for only ten cents, so anyone could afford to buy it. It represented a whole new idea in publishing.

Since the ^{introduction} invention of the steam rotary press in 1830, inexpensively produced reading matter had flooded the American market. Story papers, such as Street and Smith's *New York Weekly* and *The New York Herald* had for decades provided cheaply made editions jammed with serialized pot-boiled adventure stories, simpering romance, and melodramatic thrillers from contract-writers who produced their novelettes rapidly and for fractions of pennies a word. Additionally, there were "shilling shockers" and "penny dreadfuls," also serials of about 40,000-50,000 words, selling for anywhere from 12.5¢ to a quarter apiece. These pulpy publications were ephemeral and pitched to the low-brow reader; the well-educated

and erudite disdained them. Some, including Nathaniel Hawthorne, called them "literary rubbish" and believed they were undermining the public intelligence if not the public morality; others, including some large publishers, predicted that if this sort of publication continued, it would mean "the end of the book"—especially the relatively new fictional form, the novel—as an artistic viability.

Not everyone was so alarmed. Among the troopers in the cavalry camp, one sergeant was particularly delighted to discover this new form of publishing. He was the well-known story-paper hack and muckraker, political pundit, convicted felon, and bigamist, Edward C. Z. Judson, who, writing as Ned Buntline, would, within a decade's time, introduce Buffalo Bill Cody to the world through the pages of a similar book. He would so perfect the form and produce so many titles (some estimate as many as 400), that he would later be named "The King of the Dime Novelists" by his fellow scribbler, Prentiss Ingraham, who himself produced over a hundred titles.

Ingraham and Judson were only two of many thousands of writers who would capitalize on the new form, which exploded with the invention of the Linotype printing ^{process} press in the mid-1870s. The "yellow backs," as they were derisively called, were immensely popular; everyone, even those who decried them, read them. Some estimates are that between 1860 and 1910, more than eleven million individual titles were produced. For better or worse, it was nothing short of a "revolution" in the publishing business, one that left an indelible stamp on the whole industry and utterly changed the way

books were written, sold, published, and marketed.

Dime novels were by no means the last such innovation. Over time, the introduction of the pocket book, the mass market paperback, and, later, audio books would be greeted with skepticism by traditionalists and enthusiasm by those who saw opportunity in such new ideas. Even the venerable Book-of-the-Month Club, caused lamentations in the 1920s by those who saw it as an attack on the neighborhood bookshop, an American fixture that would ultimately be forced into near oblivion by mega-chain, free-standing book stores such as Barnes and Noble and Borders.

Even such book supermarkets as those have not been impervious to rapid technological innovation. Online booksellers undercut their prices and offer unlimited inventory, instantly available. A few years ago, amazon.com marketed the Kindle, a highly improved (over earlier e-readers) machine, and made tens of thousands of titles available for inexpensive download; Borders has countered with its own e-reader, the Kobo; and in recent months, Apple has stormed the book world with the I-Pad, a catch-all, semi-computer and graphic-enhanced electronic gaming board with multiple applications, not the least of which is a sophisticated e-reader that threatens, finally, to bring about the "end of the book" as a physical reality.

At this writing, more than two million I-Pads have been sold, a truly astounding initial sales number for any new product costing more than a few hundred dollars; some claim that it is the most significant technological innovation to hit publishing since the Gutenberg's moveable type press replaced hand-printing in 1440.

The ultimate question, though, has less to do with the phenomenal popularity of a new form than with what the ultimate impact of such change will be on publishing in general. Alarms are sounding all over the place, with the result that a lot of people

“in the trade,” to coin a phrase, are nervous.

†

This past spring in a move that attracted a great deal of unexpected attention, Dr. Paul W. Ludden, Provost of Southern Methodist University, announced that as of June 1, 2010, he would suspend operations of SMU Press, which has been actively publishing since 1939. The reason, he announced, was that the press was not paying for itself; when it was pointed out that the mission of a university press was seldom to make a profit but rather to promote the school and set a standard for publishing quality, he awkwardly shifted his position and said that the occasion for his decision was the “rapid changes” that were “sweeping the nation” with regard to the manner in which books were published and read. He was referring to the so-called “digital revolution” in publishing.

Although he may have been acting prematurely—*he* might say “preemptively”—Dr. Ludden’s reaction to recent technological changes in publishing is by no means unique. His actions were perhaps not as well considered as most of the responses coming from the industry as a whole, but they were by no means atypical. The most prominent people in publishing have, it seems, been caught flat-footed by the rapidity with which what is now suddenly but commonly called “e-publishing” has emerged.

Reporting on the recent Book Expo America conference, *Publisher’s Lunch* summarized a breakfast panel discussion that was supposed to be on “The Value of the Book,” but quickly deteriorated into a debate about the impact of e-publishing on the whole business (www.publisherslunch.com). Distinguished executives from several of the largest publishing concerns in the country engaged in a lively—some might say “fractious”—argument. Skip Prichard from the national wholesaler Ingram offered the most positive spin on recent developments, stating,

“Overall it’s one of the most exciting times to be in the business... using that creativity and technology together... it’s going to be an incredible five years ahead.” Others on the panel agreed. To deny the obvious advantages of e-publishing and e-reading would be foolish, particularly when one considers that the difference in price point of a hard-copy book (say, \$25 for a new novel) and downloaded copy of the same text (99¢) is so dynamic. But all acknowledged that the future of the physical book is, at best, unknown, at worst, tenuous.

For many involved in the business, this surge into the future of publishing represents the perfect blend of technology and art. Technophiles, already enraptured by blogging and twittering (which some might call “e-rubbish”), have recently posted articles with titles such as “Burn the Books, Burn the Boats,” gleefully touting the apparent triumph of bits and bytes over the ancient empire of paper and ink. There are predictions that brick and mortar bookstores will soon go the way of music stores, and recent indications are that B&N is gradually shifting its inventory *away* from books and more toward other items, geegaws, and gimcracks, for the most part, throw pillows and glassware and other accessories to reading and relaxing and, I presume, gnoshing on a bran muffin and slurping a Starbucks while scrolling through the latest Best Seller list and selecting one to download.

On the other hand, there are the more stolidly traditional bibliophiles who assert that all this is a fad, and that “once the new wears off,” readers will quickly return to their physical books, seeking comfort in something that requires no batteries or on-line accounts to read and can be toted to the beach, tucked into a pocket, or taken onto a floatie at the neighborhood pool and casually perused without fear of losing hundreds of dollars in investment when some chunky Bubba unexpectedly cannon-balls into the water.

Workman’s Bob Miller suggested, hopefully, that after a time, “the physical object [the book] will regain its magic” even as e-publishing gains traction. But Esther Newberg from International Creative Management admitted, “I’m scared to death. One of the only good things about being old is that I’m not going to have to deal with this for long.” Unquestionably, she spoke for a lot of traditionalists who shudder at the thought of the “end of the book.”

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Dire forecasts about the impact of “replacement technology” are not new, of course; dark predictions about the future of literary production have also been heard for centuries. Also, books aren’t the only potential victims of technological innovation. Some folks can remember when the demise of the motion picture was forecast as television emerged. Similar predictions were offered fifty years before about the future of the legitimate theater when movies—that were cheap to make, cheap to see, and widely available—came out. Somehow, though, the stage and the big screen are still with us, still part of our world; but there is no question that they’ve changed, adapted.

If it is to survive, the book business also will have to adapt. There can be no question that e-publishing is here to stay and will become a larger part of the publishing industry. The *Wall Street Journal* recently reported that, today, e-books comprise only about three to five percent of the market, but, “they are fast accelerating the decline of physical books, forcing retailers, publishers, authors and agents to reinvent their business models or be painfully crippled.” Mike Shatzkin, head of Idea Logical Co., a publishing consulting firm, stated, “By the end of 2012, digital books will be 20-25% of unit sales” (<http://topics.wsj.com/subject/E/E-Books/2512>).

This might seem to offer a grim future for writers’ prospects, at least insofar as the hard-bound book is concerned, especially at a time when

publishing seems to be stagnating because of the recession. Bowker reports no significant increases in new titles being offered in the United States in 2009 (around 288,000 new titles) over 2008; but of those, the number of new fiction titles *declined by nearly 9,000* new books from 2008 (juveniles were up, though, by about 3,000 titles). What's more important, though, is that Bowker also reports that 764,448 titles were published in "non-traditional" and "unclassified" categories, such as POD and other forms of e-publishing. Kelly Gallagher, vice president of Bowker, commented, "We're seeing that the face of publishing itself is changing. Non-traditional publishing . . . continues to offer new avenues and opportunities . . . Given the exponential growth over the past three years, it's showing no signs of abating" (www.bowker.com/index.php/press-releases). If the trend continues as she suggests, some predict that by the end of the next decade, the physical book will have been relegated to an item of luxury or curiosity, the province of collectors and specialists, that even libraries will have gone "totally digital," and books will be as quaintly archaic as push lawn mowers or hand-cranked ice cream.

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To some extent the battle lines over e-publishing are drawn along generational fronts. Younger editors such as Juliet Grames of SoHo Press believe that "multi-media approaches" are an exciting development. They "level the playing field (to a degree) between the big houses and little houses," she said, and they are reviving forms of literature, long neglected, such as the short story. Grimes stated, "I am prepared to present a case against any argument you may make about why electronic publishing is bad for the industry"; but she quickly added, "For full disclosure, I am not a digital reader myself—I spend all day staring at a computer screen and prefer to do my pleasure reading in hard-copy format."

Such contradictions contribute

to the confusion. On the one hand, people welcome the idea of inexpensive and highly accessible texts that can be cheaply acquired and read, easily stored, and lent to friends they've never met via e-mail attachment; on the other, they regard that activity as being somehow different from snuggling up with a dog-eared paperback and a plate of cookies and just reading.

Ultimately, economics will probably rule, insofar as the e-publishing/e-reading issue is concerned. Many point out that amazon.com's practice of offering first-run titles and Best Sellers for 99¢ (widely perceived to be a major loss) cannot continue indefinitely, especially after the practice of e-reading catches on and starts replacing books; download prices will soon rise. It doesn't take an MBA to figure out that the sheer overhead involved in designing a book, then warehousing and shipping it, shelving it for retail, then dealing with returns is so much a part of the cover price, that it will take a lot of fiscal adjustment to bring a dollar downloaded volume up to the same price as retail list. Competition could keep price point down, although this hasn't been the case in hard-copy books, all of which sell for about the same amount relative to length and volume discounts.

Alternatively, if the cost of a download reaches \$10 or \$12 a volume—and that's quite likely—then that's getting close to the discount price for a hardcover book offered by many big-box stores and even by on-line book sellers. Given the fact that an e-reader requires power, has to be held with two hands, and is susceptible to all kinds of glitches and interference, people might well decide that a physical book that costs about the same amount of money is less trouble to read.

In addition, there are questions of copyright, subsidiary rights, and how royalties can be accurately tallied and fairly paid for e-published books. E-pirating is a serious problem for both the music and movie business; whereas, it's not been too big a problem in

publishing until lately (The Author's Guild's recent legal actions, i.e.), it could easily become a central issue, particularly since the profit margins in publishing have never been huge, and any loss of revenue can harm not only a publisher's bottom line but also an author's chances of picking up another contract.

Other challenges will also have to be met, and adjustments will have to be made. There is the question of Publish on Demand (POD) practices, for example, something that is an ancillary spin-off of e-publishing. At the present time, many agents won't touch a POD contract for a client, even when it's from a reputable publisher, and few editors will consider reviewing them. Mike Merschel, Book Review editor for the *Dallas Morning News* stated that he wouldn't automatically refuse to review a POD volume, but it would be unlikely. "If this is the only way that book can come to market," he asked, "then what does that indicate?" Another book review editor was blunter: "If [a book] had to go POD that means that the publisher lacked faith in it. Why should I have faith in it, either as a reviewer or as a book buyer?" A university press publisher was even stronger in his opinion: "It's an insult to offer that kind of thing to a writer. If the book is worth doing, it's worth doing as a real book. More to the point though, nobody's going to buy a POD volume—or not enough somebodies will buy it to matter much to anybody. It's a lose/lose proposition."

There are other challenges, such as the growth of on-line vanity publishing—or books that have passed through no editorial filter—that will soon have to be addressed, as well. Plus, there's the question of reprint rights (which would effectively disappear, since anyone with a computer can reprint an e-book, so there will be no need for a paperback edition), film and audio rights (if the e-readers can be rigged for audio reading for the sight-impaired, does that constitute an

turning it down

audio book and a residual contract?). There is also the question of translation—software programs can already translate text; if a reader uses one to translate the book himself, is this a copyright violation?

“We have our work cut out for us,” one agent admitted. “Old contract boiler plate will go out the window, and we may be negotiating rights to forms that only exist in somebody’s imagination.” Many editorial considerations will also go out the window. The acceptable length of a novel, for example, has always been closely related to the price-point of a published book, but since e-books can run to any length the author wishes—there are no length requirements on the Internet—there will be no limit on epics and no minimum for what constitutes a viable volume. Dust jacket art, book design, even endorsements will no longer be important, as they can be altered or utterly changed in an instant; individual readers can adjust the font or even the order of chapters, if they like; they can even rewrite scenes that displease them to suit their fancy.

This gives rise to the question of whether or not an e-book really *is* a book, or if it’s merely a shadow, a phantom, a hint of a book that has many of the same qualities of the genuine article but, truly, isn’t even there. One author put it this way: “It’s crazy,” she said. “You can actually think up a story, write it out on a screen, submit it electronically, and have it edited and composed and transmitted digitally, then offered for sale, downloaded, and read without a single piece of paper being used. Hell, you can even have your royalty checks direct-deposited and then spend the money with a debit card. I guess we’ve saved a tree or two, but I wonder what we’ve lost?”

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A change of this magnitude will unquestionably produce casualties. And certainly it may well be that the book itself will become one. A whole generation of young people are grow-

ing up with no need of newspapers or magazines; many have seen hundreds of films without ever entering a cinema, have listened to concert-quality music without ever buying an album or sitting in an auditorium. People are already taking “virtual vacations,” engaging in “virtual relationships” that are sometimes more emotionally intimate than the real thing; they take courses without classrooms, get on-line medical exams without ever being in the same room with a physician, consult attorneys they’ll never meet, buy cars and houses they don’t see in advance, have their taxes done by a computer program, and do all their shopping from the comfort of their pajamas and with no problem finding a parking space.

It’s a brave, new world to have such gadgets. The question is whether we have lost some quality in our headlong rush toward efficiency and financial advantage

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Ultimately, Dr. Ludden of SMU met with the press’s tiny staff and guaranteed their jobs for the immediate future. But he has made it clear that if the press is to survive as a publishing entity, it must change, adapt, and respond to the new demands of the publishing and reading public. Over the next two or three years, there will be probably a large number of publishing entities, ranging from the large commercial houses of Gotham to the tiniest literary presses of the Rocky Mountains and oil-washed Gulf shores that will simply be unable to survive in a world where consumers want what they want immediately and in the newest, cheapest, most modern form available.

This is not necessarily a cause for despair. When the dime novel hit the American book market, the stodgy New England literary establishment might have sneered in disgust, but other writers—Mark Twain, for one—recognized that the form had enormous potential and gave it some

respect. Without the efforts of all those thousands of hacks who ground out their tales of derring-do for pennies so their publishers could sell them for dimes, we might never have had the solid archetypes that presently inform our contemporary fiction (especially the Western), the icons of heroes and villains, intrepid women, brave men, Indians and cowboys and mountain men, as well as ranchers and rustlers, sodbusters and sheriffs, miners and barkeeps, train robbers and horse thieves, as well as soiled doves and whirlago girls who people our work. Whatever was lost has been forgotten; what was found, somehow, we kept.

This is because the book, no matter what form it takes, is ultimately about story, character, setting, dialogue, tone, and voice. As one agent said, “How the books are printed and sold isn’t anything for the writer to worry about. We’re looking for a good story we can publish and be proud of. The rest of it is up to the accountants to figure out.”

Essentially, a book is merely a series of consecutively numbered pages with words on them. It’s what those words say that matters, something that is the product of one imagination offered for the amusement and edification of another; it’s not any more complicated than that. The book has endured for at least three thousand years, survived and outlasted iconoclastic changes that we’ve long forgotten. I suspect that, somehow, it will survive this one, too. With luck, it will emerge better, stronger, and more enduring than ever. About all we, as writers, can do, is keep imagining and keep telling stories.

Western novelist and critic Clay Reynolds is Director of Creative Writing at the University of Texas at Dallas. His anthology, Hero of a Thousand Fights: The Western Dime Novels of Ned Buntline, is scheduled for release this fall.