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English 1450

21 September 2017

Novels to be a Novelty?

On November 19th of 2007, Amazon’s Kindle made its debut to anticipation that would lead to it selling out hours within its release. The excitement following e-books, from Amazon’s Kindle to Barnes & Noble’s Nook, would also lead to intense discussion about the future of reading. Ten years later the predicted paper back apocalypse has yet to occur, it turns out e-book sales hit their peak in 2014, and books appear to be making a resurgence. Perhaps it is time to pose a new question to the literary community: ask not if society is reading at all but *what* is being read.

Writers have been debating the future of books for seemingly as long as books have been around. For example Octave Uzanne’s short story, “The End of Books,” in which Uzanne tries to predict what books of the future will be like and comes up with a whole new technology. Online reading is not such a new thing, many services, such as Project Gutenberg have been in existence before 2007 but it was not until the e-book craze the Kindle brought that publishers really began to sound the alarm “as readers migrated to new digital devices, e-book sales soared, up 1,260 percent between 2008 and 2010, alarming booksellers” (Alter), print sales also dwindled and in 2011 the panic really began as Boarders declared bankruptcy. As the e-book fever continued, articles predicting the “end” of books cited advancements in technology such as the Kindle for the main reason the publishing industry was under siege but one can argue the Kindle must improve before it becomes anything considered a real threat. Similarly to many new forms of technology, the Kindle was met with excitement at its release but as the years have passed and its basic format has yet to change, any remaining enthusiasm for the Kindle has dwindled down. “While analysts once predicted that e-books would overtake print by 2015, digital sales have instead slowed sharply” (Alter), “…according to the Association of American Publishers, e-book sales, which constitute about 20% of the book-buying market, have plateaued” (Nuwer). When e-books first emerged there seemed to be reason to panic about sales of physical books due to the many benefits of e-book reading such as the portability of such devices, the accessibility, the advantages for people with disabilities, etc. But those concerned must keep in mind that problems also emerge as we step away from physical books. Some argue that something is lost as we go digital, “electronic reading can negatively impact the way the brain responds to text, including reading comprehension, focus, and the ability to maintain attention to details like plot and sequence of events” (Nuwer). Either way, when the “end” of books comes one can predict it will be meet with objections from bibliophiles and kindle lovers alike.

In the information age more reading is available per minute than could be consumed by one person throughout a lifetime. “Each day, I spend hours reading on my iPhone – news articles, blog posts and essays” states Craig Mod in his essay on digital reading: the average person scrolls through news feeds, Twitter feeds, Facebook feeds, and does not take in the insane amount of information being processed per second. This average person reads through thousands of words a day without blinking an eye but when asked to sit down to read a book of the same length suddenly this becomes a task. Some blame shortened attention spans, others a lack of will, for whatever the reason our society has stopped reading longer publications placing genres such as the novel in danger.

To explain why this is a dangerous trend, one must first define what makes something a novel: long fictional prose. This definition makes it easy to explain why the novel is losing popularity. A large majority of our society spends their leisure time dedicated to other entertainment that one could argue does not require the mind to work as hard. “On multipurpose reading devices like the iPhone, more immediately gratifying pastimes like video games are a click away for readers with short attention spans” (Stone) one article notes. It takes concentration to actually sit down with a book and focus on it enough to comprehend what one is reading. To read a whole novel requires one to commit to concentrate for a sustained period of time. In a society very much focused on instantaneous gratification it should not come as a surprise that novels are losing popularity. Maybe some shrug at this and ask “who needs novels?” But the novel is important as a genre for the “fiction” part of its definition.

Novels are written to be relatable, to make readers feel for the characters featured and experience something they may not have otherwise had they not decided to pick up the book. As the saying goes, to read can be to walk in another’s shoes. Reading novels has other benefits as well, as Mod poetically puts it: “To return to a book is to return not just to the text but also to a past self. We are embedded in our libraries. To reread is to remember who we once were, which can be equal parts scary and intoxicating….if a resurfaced tweet has an emotional resonance of x, than a passage in a book by which you were once moved must resonate at 100x” (Mod). While NPR or other news organizations may write longer human-interest story comparable to a novel, reading this is not the same experience. At its basis, this piece is still news, written to inform not to entertain. It may present empathy for its characters but these are real people whose words we can only read and compare to our own experience, we may read of their actions and thoughts but nothing compares to reading through the perspective of a character the way a novel may force one to do.

If the issue of fiction is ruled out then the novel is largely in danger due to its length: a novel does not fit into the modern day readers pocket nor the modern day attention span. When many have shifted to reading online, it can be challenging to read something like a textbook or a longer book, i.e. a novel, on a screen. As noted, the Kindle and other e-books must improve their technology if they wish to be the top choice for annotations and bookmarks that are easier done through margins and dog-ears in a physical book than on a screen. A screen, as Mod notes, is the right size for shorter content: “Short to mid-length content feels indigenous to the size, resolution and use of smartphones… the easy romance between our smartphones and short-to-mid-length articles and video is part of the reason why venture capitalists have poured hundreds of millions of dollars into New York publishing upstarts such as Vox, Vice and Buzzfeed.” It is the rise of publications such as Buzzfeed, which produces a large amount of its content in list form, and social media platforms such as Twitter, which shortens news to 140 characters, that have made our society used to reading shorter publications. When all of one’s thoughts can be expressed in emoji’s why bother to read a long novel about them?

Why strain the eyes and mind when with one click one may conjure up sound and images galore made specifically for ones listening and viewing pleasure? In comparison to more immersive modes of communication, such as video, reading an actual physical book- especially the long prose that makes up a novel- takes time and effort that may seem just plain boring for many. Paper books are not an interactive media in modern terms. They may be interactive for one’s imagination but do not present anything but words for the senses, only the eyes are entertained. As Mod states, “…for [at] the intersection of books and digital there’s still much exploration to be had.” Perhaps the future of books is not in the kindle or other e-books but in other forms of media such as those used by Jon Bois in his futuristic sports writing “17776.”

To explain his vision for what “the future of football” will look like Bois created a multimedia masterpiece by combining text with audio, newspaper clippings, google earth imagery, and other visuals. The result is perhaps closest to what Bois describes as a “kaleidoscope of different formats, media, tools, sights, and sounds” the internet offers to tell our stories. Bois states that we are not even scraping the surface of what the internet offers but maybe this is what could emerge as the next technology to replace the book as “the emergence of e-books is causing various entrepreneurs and technologists to reconsider the kind of experience that books might one day deliver” (Stone). Although technology has made immersive books available, this media provides such a drastically different experience than print that one must question if it can even still be considered a book. If the sound, image, tone, characters, etc. are provided for readers are they still reading? As other writers have found when experimenting with storytelling, “Tradition-minded readers might resist the notion of stories gussied up with potentially gratuitous video and encumbered with the need for conversations between writer and reader” (Stone).

When placed next to interactive digital media, it seems like print media is fighting a losing battle to keep its audience’s attention but this does not necessarily mean the “end” of reading or books is near. With bookstores still a feature on many small town main streets, even in our ever-digitized world it seems that books are here to stay or at the very least books will be going the way of the record. This is to say technology has advanced to the extent that paper books are not a necessity but due to the sentimental value attached to them, books will always have a place in our society, even if that place is just as collectables.

Marisa – you’re off to a solid start here with lots of good evidence marshalled about the differences between print and digital reading. At the moment that evidence is organized a bit haphazardly. You seem to be making a number of related but not necessarily connected points, and it’s hard to discern your guiding claim. As you revise, you want to work toward a particular argument (who are you trying to convince? What do you want them to believe after reading your argument) and organize your evidence a bit more carefully in support of that argument. If you’d like to chat about this I’m available during office hours or by appointment.

--Ryan Cordell

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