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## THE BOTHER WITH BOOKS

### Exit

Exiting a book is sometimes not so easy, no matter how driven is the desire for the ending of a story. Readers curl back to earlier pages, reviewing inscriptions and acknowledgements, and returning to details that haunt the conclusion. With the onset of digital book forms — e-books, Kindles, and the forthcoming and biblical-sounding Sony Tablet — there is a sense that the book itself is exiting, that its history is coming to an end. The prospect of disappearance of the book, a thing so loved and reliable as a possession, gift, companion and accessory that has populated all dimensions of modern existence from archive to showcase, city to field, car to living room, and commanded myriad repositories in libraries, shops, and domestic shelving, seems both unlikely and disturbing. Nostalgia for this object of centuries of consumption is compounded by both panic about literacy, and confusion about the proliferation of new media that might replace books. The creep of technological change and the many un-ideal eventualities of the Information Age have also forewarned that some changes bring regression. So the people of the book, the book lovers, the book burners, the bookworms, the collectors of first editions, the loiterers in vintage shops, and consumers in pristine stores, those for whom a book is something to touch, hold, see, feel and scribble in, will contend uneasily with the conversion of story modes into digital concentrate. This era, however, is also one of rebirth, with potential for the most spectacular era of literacy that has yet been experienced, in the western world. The book is more alive today than ever but its forms are changing and multiplying.

In a way, this is no change at all as books have always existed in a multiplicity of evolving styles and components, and the medium of book-form has been endlessly adapted to a multitude of uses. Novels, plays, screenplays, storybooks, journals, comic books, diaries, notebooks, logbooks, pattern books, text books, fabric books and books covered in human skin, down the ages the book has never been a singular type of object, except in its presence as a thing with pages. Neither does its receptivity to what we now call “multimedia” date from the digital era. As Anne Cranny-Francis (2005) points out, even the earliest books in the West, the medieval illuminated manuscripts, combined visual and verbal modes like any postmodern text. These ancestors of modern paperbacks and hard backs gained power through the authority of their sources, the churches and states that authorised and imbued the words and pictures with the aura of the divine speech of God. The ideology of faith in words that has

been so challenged over the decades since Derrida's rattling of the unstable properties of writing is one that will likely be maintained into the future without preference for whether books appear in physical forms or the content is commuted to new media because books ultimately are the memories and imaginings contained within. As Georges Poulet (2001) has written, "a book is not shut in by its contours... It asks nothing better than to exist outside itself, or to let you exist in it." Books, he says, "in order to exist as mental objects ... must relinquish their existence as real objects" (1321). For Poulet, a book is a site of communion between the consciousness of writers and of readers and his view, expressed in the late 1960s, seems almost premonitory today as books shed their shells and transform.

### Passages

The passage of the book into digital forms was discussed in August 2009, in a public panel entitled, "Why Bother With the Book?" that was convened for Children's Book Week at CityLibraries Aitkenvale in Townsville, and which I was invited to chair. The panellists were assembled from various reaches of the world of books: an award-winning children's author, James Moloney; a book-maker and publisher, Jeanie Adams, founder of Black Ink Press; a communications officer for the Queensland Writers Centre, Lisette Ogg; and a long-time bookseller, Sue Cole, the proprietor of Mary Who? Bookshop in Townsville. Contemplating the future of books within the setting of a library seemed both appropriate and ironic as it is not easy to imagine the demise of the book when surrounded by shelves of them. Not many specific book titles were mentioned, but our panellists discussed books without nostalgia for their passing and rather as material and immaterial icons of the present and the future that are very relevant to notions of truth, community, intellectual property and commerce. The comments of the panellists were sensitive to the profound implications of technological change and optimistic for the ways in which literacy and literature are paradoxically both at risk and at a premium in the changing forms of the book.

Lisette Ogg opened the forum by reflecting on the onset of the digital era as an evolutionary stage in communication that is analogous to the history of change in forms of transport. Just as pedestrian travel has given way over centuries to various forms of vehicle transport, and as sea and rail have been replaced by air travel, so, she argued, has reading, literacy and communication been adapted from the mechanism of the printing press to the various digital modes of reading and writing. Ogg's views are long heralded in Communication Studies, notably in the work of James Carey (1989), who has highlighted how historical changes in modes of transport are comparable to transitions in communication technologies. This history, he suggests, is condensed in the meaning of the verb

“to communicate” which once referred to the movement of goods or people or information, and later, as technology overcame the limitations of space and place, transformed to mean only the movement of information. Ogg’s careful plotting of technological change created a broad perspective on books that arrested any sentiments for nostalgia.

Jeanie Adams, an independent publisher of children’s books and books by Indigenous writers, reflected on the business of publishing and on the art of book making. She explained and demonstrated how her business is developing towards maintaining traditional book forms and also adapting to digital publishing with the recent release of her first e-book. Jeanie also spoke of the creation of Little Black Books, her recently published set of tiny books written “by kids for kids” that were developed in workshops with children in North Queensland schools. Holding up a palm-sized “story-board” on which children’s images, words and themes were captured, Jeanie showed how these books were essentially “handmade.” While her business as a publisher continues to involve material objects and design, her engagement with communities of readers and writers is largely unchanged by the mechanisms of production. Jeanie’s passion to capture stories through engagements with readers found resonance with James Moloney’s comments on the ineffable connections between books and truth. For Moloney, the “cover to cover” journey of reading right through a book is coterminous with the desires of the writer to realise and express something that might be meaningfully understood as “truth,” irrespective of whether the realisation is gained through the articulation of fiction or fact. The book, whether it is read or written stands, he suggested, as a signifier of the intangible connections between writing, reading and knowledge. The abiding issues he perceives therefore in this era of change concern youth literacy and communication rather than the fate of a commodity.

While Ogg’s, Adams’s and Moloney’s comments arose from their engagements with the creative processes of writers and readers, Sue Cole addressed a highly topical issue of territorial copyright, circulating a petition against the Productivity Commission’s recommendation to the Federal Government to abolish territorial copyright, which is viewed by its critics as a form of publishing industry protection. The issue had been much in the news through the intense and sometimes emotive rallying of public opinion by writers’ groups and publishers, especially Tim Winton’s comments a few months earlier at the annual Miles Franklin Award. Australian territorial copyright is claimed to have worked in the combined interests of local publishers, writers and independent booksellers and has enabled the national literary output to grow and to compete in markets in Australia and abroad. Within our panel, the issue brought to the fore the tremendous weight of cultural sentiment and value that attaches to books, especially those by Australian authors. Sue’s petition was well supported

by audience members, and, happily, the Federal Government has since declined to implement the Commission's advice, for the time being at least. However, issues of copyright are at the core of the future of books, and the spectacular expansion of publishing — and potential piracy — that is enabled through digital book forms menaces not only the sanctity of authors' rights but the whole fragile apparatus of the literary and commercial values of books.

The debate about territorial copyright as a national issue bespeaks the relatively regional status of Australia — or any nation, for that matter — within the global publishing industry. But in the sense that Jeanie Adams and Sue Cole specifically addressed issues within their businesses that are located in Townsville and North Queensland, a degree of regional focus occurred in the discussion but it was not an emphasis. James Moloney, whose popularity with teachers and secondary school students in Townsville brought him to this city twice in 2009, and he will return again in 2010 for more school engagements, also maintained reflections that were oriented to general rather than regional issues. Lisette Ogg, on her first visit to Townsville for the panel, emphasised the role of the Queensland Writers Centre in supporting and fostering writers within the state. So it seemed that region was a latent or lesser element in the discussion than the more abstract cultural values of books, reading, writing and literacy. Perhaps this was simply the direction of the evening; a series of panels might identify more specific issues for the reading and writing publics of specific locales, and as this is a topic worthy of extended debate, if only to reflect at more length on the passages of the technological changes underway, future forums should be encouraged. Some parting comments by audience and panellists about gender and reading, and about youth literacy sparked lively interest that was quelled by time but showed nevertheless that there are many more reasons to be bothered with books.

## Re-entry

Books — those things with pages that one holds in a hand — will not disappear too soon. The worldwide collections are too plentiful to vanish entirely, and powerful forces of conservation will maintain books as historical artefacts in perpetuity. But the future production of these commodities will undoubtedly transform, especially as young and unborn generations increasingly take for granted the remediation of stories through HTML and digital prose, and the digital book will speak in its own voice through audio technology. And those readers of the future who will never know the pain of a shoulder strained by a bag-load of books carried to school or to university, and for whom a portable downloader will serve not only for entertainment but for all needs of information, books will likely be seen as just that: baggage. Writing, reading and literacy are the forces that continue, and with every new arrival of an idea and its interpreter, the book re-enters, its forms remodelled, its archives expanded.

## Works Cited

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