

# The Rattle of Pebbles

by  
Jason Epstein

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# The Rattle of Pebbles

## I.

Trade book publishing is by nature a cottage industry, decentralized, improvisational, personal; best performed by small groups of likeminded people, devoted to their craft, jealous of their autonomy, sensitive to the needs of writers and to the diverse interests of readers. If money were their primary goal these people would probably have chosen other careers. They might, for example, have become literary agents, many of whom have prospered as authors' royalty guarantees have risen sharply in today's highly competitive market for saleable talent. But most publishers and editors I have known prefer to think of themselves, as I do, as devotees of a craft whose reward is the work itself and not its cash value.

Today the book business stands at the edge of a vast transformation, one that promises much op-

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4<sup>v</sup> opportunity for innovation: much trial, much error, and much improvement. Long before another half century passes, the industry as I have known it for the past fifty years will have been altered almost beyond recognition. In the 1920s a brilliant generation of young American publishers fell heir to the cultural transformation that became known as modernism and nurtured it with taste, energy, and passion. As Einstein's generation introduced once and for all the themes of modern physics and as Cézanne, Picasso, and their contemporaries had done the same for painting, the writers of the early twentieth century had created once and for all the vocabulary and themes of modern literature. Much elaboration would follow, but the fundamental work had been done and could not be done again. My career in publishing has traced the long, downward, but by no means barren slope from that Parnassian moment.

The cultural flowering of the 1920s was an act of liberation — or so it seemed at the time to its makers — from a culture whose moral, aesthetic, and intellectual failings had become intolerable. The transformation that awaits writers and publishers today is much different and will have far greater consequences. It arises not from cultural despair and aesthetic rebellion but from new technologies whose cultural influence promises to be no less revolutionary than the introduction of movable type,

a vector of civilization which these new technologies, after half a millennium, have unceremoniously replaced in the last dozen years. The implications of this epochal event have been noticed only in passing, as those of Gutenberg's innovation were unforeseen by its own contemporaries.

4<sup>r</sup> Twenty years ago when my children and their friends came of age I advised them to shun the publishing business, which seemed to me then in a state of terminal decrepitude if not extinction. Today I would offer young people to whom books are precious the opposite advice. The transformation that awaits them foreshadows cultural ramifications that can hardly be imagined but that promise a lifetime of creative adventure as intoxicating in its much different way as what awaited the generation of Horace Liveright, Alfred Knopf, and Bennett Cerf eighty years ago when Joyce and Hemingway and Eliot and their peers emerged from the muck of the World War and the terrible innocence that spawned it.

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Here I want to describe the early stages of these technologies as I understand them. But I cannot do so without discussing the increasingly distressed industry in which I have worked for the past half century. During this time book publishing has devi-

ated from its true nature by assuming, under duress from unfavorable market conditions and the misconceptions of remote managers, the posture of a conventional business. This has led to many difficulties, for book publishing is not a conventional business. It more closely resembles a vocation or an amateur sport in which the primary goal is the activity itself, not its financial outcome. For owners and editors willing to work for the joy of the task, book publishing in my time has been immensely rewarding. For investors looking for conventional returns it has been disappointing.

5v Random House when I joined it in 1958 was even then the leading American publisher of general interest books, but its internal telephone directory, listing its hundred or so employees, didn't fill a sheet the size of a postal card. For us in those days Random House was an unusually happy second family whose daytime home fit comfortably within the north wing of the old Villard mansion at Madison and 50th Street, with its black-and-white marble lobby, its unreliable elevator, and its courtyard, where we were entitled to six precious parking spaces: the other twelve belonged to the archdiocese of New York, which occupied the mansion's central and southern sections. My office, with dark green walls, worn parquet floors, and a Juliet balcony overlooking the courtyard, had been a bedroom, and from time to time I came to work and

found a wayward author who had spent the night there, not always alone. These offices were a second home for writers as well as for ourselves. Mrs. Debanzie, our Scottish receptionist, usually sent them upstairs to see us unannounced: w.h. Auden in torn overcoat and carpet slippers delivering the manuscript of *The Dyer's Hand*; Ted Geisel, known as Dr. Seuss, arriving with his story boards to recite *Green Eggs and Ham* to us in Bennett Cerf's large, square office at the end of the hall; Cardinal Spellman submitting his poetry, which we published as a neighborly act and to forestall controversy with the monsignors over our parking spaces.

5r In my memory I associate our authors with particular parts of the building: Terry Southern sitting on a wooden table in the basement mail room next to the postage machine cackling in his exaggerated Texas drawl over scenes he was writing for *Dr. Strangelove*; Andy Warhol outside my office at the head of the once grand but now battered marble staircase, bowing slightly and addressing me in a deferential whisper as Mr. Epstein, as if I were a patriarch and not someone in a torn sweater and corduroy trousers hardly older than he was; John O'Hara, wearing a three-piece suit showing off his Rolls Royce in the courtyard on a sunny day; Ralph Ellison in my office, smoking a cigar and explaining with his hands how Thelonious Monk developed his chords.

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Though our authors relied upon their agents to negotiate their contracts with us, for many of them Random House was their family as much as it was ours. Today most publishing imprints have dissolved within their vast media conglomerates and many authors now depend on their agents as they once did upon their publishers for general sustenance. But forty years ago agents were mere peripheral necessities, like dentists, consulted as needed, not the dominant figures in the lives of authors that many of them have since become. In the Villard mansion editors almost never held meetings but exchanged news and gossip or asked for advice when they felt like it, often from authors who happened to be in the building. In many cases, these authors became our lifelong friends. But at Random House, unlike Simon and Schuster, a much more intimate family in those days, the editors' private lives seldom intersected and we rarely met outside the office. Most of our friendships were with our authors and we jealously reserved these valuable intimacies for ourselves. A regular army lives in a barracks. Guerrilla armies live amid the people who sustain them and for whom they fight. So do book publishers.

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Today the central section of the Villard mansion is the entrance to the Palace Hotel. The southern

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wing houses a fashionable restaurant. From its entrance you can look up and see my former balcony. By 1972 Random House had acquired Alfred A. Knopf, was acquired in turn by RCA, and outgrew the mansion. That spring we moved into a nondescript glass building on Third Avenue. I recall the day joylessly. We were losing more than our parking spaces. We were losing our individuality, I felt, and gaining nothing in return. Though I have been responsible for several innovations in the publishing business, I see now that each of them was intended to recapture the fleeting past. I am skeptical of progress. My instincts are archaeological. I favor the god Janus, who faces backward and forward at once. Without a vivid link to the past, the present is chaos and the future unreadable. In our culture books form such a link, perhaps the main link. How, I wondered, would the delicate process by which an author's work becomes a published book be affected by our new situation?

It was with such thoughts that I joined the migration to our new home three blocks to the east. In these new quarters with their carpeted offices we still operated independently of RCA, at least in theory, but a cottage industry within an industrial conglomerate makes no sense. The dissonance between the pretense that we were now an ordinary business and the true nature of our work made me fretful. Only in retrospect did I see that our removal

was part of a much larger transformation, affecting far more than the book publishing business and our small, elegant, amiable firm.

In the 1950s book publishing was still the small scale, highly personal industry it had been since the 1920s, when a remarkable generation of young men, and a few women, most of them Jews who were not welcome in the old-line houses, broke with their genteel predecessors and risked their personal fortunes and the disapproval of their elders by aggressively promoting the literature and ideas of modernism. Like the Manhattan gallery owners of the 1960s, they came of age during a cultural revolution and brilliantly exploited it. But when I encountered them in the 1950s these publishers seemed to me anything but revolutionary. Like the avant garde writers they championed in the Twenties, they were now an establishment and carried their years with dignity. I remember them in tweed caps, wrapped in blankets on the first-class decks of ocean liners; or strolling along Fifth Avenue on Sunday mornings in their topcoats and hats from Locke; or in Hunterdon County in autumn with Faulkner down for the weekend. They lunched at "21" and dined at Chambord and the Colony.

After a Sunday lunch at the Knopfs in Purchase, the shades were drawn and home movies shown of Alfred and Thomas Mann in lawn chairs beside Lake Constance, flickering like automata as they

moved their arms in conversation. We stayed for a second silent film showing Mann lecturing, presumably on the moral collapse of German Romanticism, for he had drawn a vertical line on a blackboard and on one side had written beauty, disease, genius, and death and on the other life and morality. Alfred Knopf might wear dark shirts and a Cossack mustache but he, even more than his staid counterparts, represented the sobriety, the unassailable dignity of his mighty generation in middle age.

Their presence was an inspiration to newcomers like myself. To topple them as they had toppled their own predecessors was unthinkable. They were to be emulated. But how? *Ulysses* and *The Waste Land* were not experiments to be perfected by later generations. They were monuments, to be studied but never surpassed. So we and our writers did our best with what we had. Yeats's brave reply to Matthew Arnold's valetudinarian "Dover Beach" lodged in my mind in those days: "Though the great song return no more/There's keen delight in what we have:/The rattle of pebbles on the shore,/Under the receding wave."

## 2.

Soon Random House will move from Third Avenue to a new corporate headquarters to be erected on Broadway by its current owner, an international

media conglomerate which embraces several well-known publishing imprints — including, in addition to Random House and Knopf, Doubleday, Bantam, Pantheon, Dell, Crown, and Ballantine, as well as a number of British imprints. General book publishing in the United States is currently dominated by five empires. Two are based in Germany — Bertelsmann, which owns the Random House group, and Holtzbrinck, which owns Henry Holt, St. Martin's, and Farrar, Straus and Giroux. Longmans, Pearson, based in London, owns the Viking, Penguin, Putnam, Dutton group, and Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation owns HarperCollins and William Morrow. Simon and Schuster, Scribner, and Pocket Books belong to Viacom, which owns Paramount Pictures among other media properties. By liquidating redundant overheads these corporate owners hope to improve the low profit margins typical of the industry. But this strategy may be wrong. Because publishers now face severe structural problems arising from an over-concentrated retail marketplace, the new owners may find the business less profitable than ever. Moreover, technological innovations likely to revolutionize the industry may soon render the traditional functions of the conglomerates themselves redundant.

Today the telephone directory of the Random House group measures eight-and-a-half by eleven inches, occupies 116 pages, and includes the names

of more than forty-five hundred employees, nearly all of them, I assume, unknown to one another. Nevertheless, the essential tasks at Random House and other publishers are still performed as they always have been, by individual editors and publicists working in small groups with a few writers at a time, though the conditions under which this work is now done differ greatly from those at the old Villard mansion. Conglomerate budgets require efficiencies and create structures that are incompatible with the notorious vagaries of literary production, work whose outcome can only be intuited. How, for instance, does a corporation budget for Norman Mailer's next novel or determine the cash value of such writers as William Faulkner and Cormac McCarthy, whose novels languished for years before they became valuable assets on the Random House backlist? Meanwhile, the retail market for books is now dominated by a few large bookstore chains whose high operating costs demand high rates of turnover and therefore a constant supply of best sellers, an impossible goal but one to which publishers have become perforce committed.

The dissonance I felt when we moved to Third Avenue was premonitory. Our industry was becoming alienated from its natural diversity by an increasingly homogeneous suburban marketplace, demanding ever more uniform products. Books are written everywhere but they need the complex cul-

tures of great cities in which to reverberate. My publishing years coincided with the great postwar dispersal of city populations and the attrition therefore of city bookstores as suburban malls increasingly became the centers of commerce, so that even the well-stocked chain-bookstore branches located in cities today evoke the undifferentiated culture of shopping malls rather than the cosmopolitanism of the cities in which they happen to have been transplanted.

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Many valuable books — most in fact — are not meant to be best sellers, and these tend to be slighted in the triage of contemporary publishing and bookselling. I don't mean that fewer books of this sort are being published. Many publishers and their staffs, including the Random House editors today, are still as determined as we were in our old building to find and promote unconventional titles of permanent or even passing value, a commitment manifest in the excellent books chosen by the major review media for their yearend lists. It is my impression that more such books are being published than ever before and more people are reading them, thanks in part to the chains and the online booksellers who have helped make book buying a stimulating part of everyday life. But the life expect-

tancy of many valuable books has declined as chain-store retailers are forced to seek ever higher rates of turnover, and morale in the industry suffers accordingly. When this phenomenon first became apparent some thirty years ago, the industry joke was that the shelf life of a book had fallen to somewhere between that of milk and yogurt. Since then the situation has worsened and the joke is no longer heard.

In the spring of 1999 Random House published the monumental life of J.P. Morgan<sup>1</sup> on which the distinguished biographer Jean Strouse had worked for fifteen years. Her plan had been to finish in four or five years, but *Morgan* was a surprisingly elusive subject and Strouse is a meticulous scholar. Reviewers called *Morgan* a major contribution to American economic and social history and a vivid portrait of the shy, cyclonic, misunderstood figure who created the modern financial system. Though *Morgan* will interest historians, bankers, and economists as well as art historians and collectors, there is nothing recondite about Strouse's book. It appeared on several bestseller lists.

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*The Los Angeles Times*, in its yearend list of the best books of 1999, called *Morgan* "a riveting detective story and a masterpiece." *Morgan* was short-listed by *The New York Times Book Review*, *The New*

<sup>1</sup> I was the editor.

*Yorker*, *Time*, *Business Week*, and other general interest publications as one of the best works of nonfiction of 1999. But when these lists appeared nine months after *Morgan* was published, fewer than one thousand copies were on hand in the 528 superstores of the Barnes and Noble chain which, together with Borders Books, the second largest chain, dominates the retail book trade. With Christmas a month away Barnes and Noble had apparently decided that in a year when millions of Americans were obsessed with the stock market, *Morgan* was nevertheless an unlikely Christmas gift. On the day the *New York Times* list appeared, copies of *Morgan* were no longer on display in Barnes and Noble's branch four blocks north of the Random House building on Third Avenue. It was Strouse's literary agent who visited the Third Avenue store that day, noticed the omission, and called it to the attention of the store manager, who ordered fifty copies. Thereafter, the chain as a whole restocked *Morgan*.

Meanwhile Strouse's book was selling briskly in the independent stores, whose clerks knew their customers' interests and understood *Morgan's* appeal. In some of these independent stores *Morgan* was a best seller. But the book chains, offering steep discounts on popular titles, have driven hundreds of independent stores out of business, a process accelerated by Internet retailers, so that only about sev-

enty-five major independents employing sophisticated sales staffs and stocking 100,000 or more titles survive. *Morgan* and some of the other "best books" of the year will withstand the bloody triage that is now commonplace in the publishing industry, but many hundreds, even thousands, of other worthy new titles will have vanished by the time next year's best books are chosen. In 1999 some 90,000 books — many worthless, many others valuable — went out of print, according to the vice chairman of Barnes and Noble.

Traditionally Random House and other publishers cultivated their backlists as their major asset, choosing titles for their permanent value as much as for their immediate appeal, so that even firms grown somnolent with age and neglect tottered along for years on their backlist earnings long after their effective lives were over. But even the strongest publishers depended on their backlists and regarded best sellers as lucky accidents. In his memoirs Bennett Cerf, the cofounder and president of Random House, wrote that when Random House acquired the firm of Alfred A. Knopf in 1960 the combined companies could shut down "for the next twenty years or so and make more money than we're making now, because our backlist is like...picking up gold from the sidewalk." This incomparable backlist included Kafka, Proust, Camus, Faulkner, O'Neill, Dr. Seuss, James Michener, Wallace Ste-

vens, Ralph Ellison, Thomas Mann, W.H. Auden, and many others, as well as the distinguished Knopf list of cookery books and American historians and the Random House children's list and dictionaries.

When we worked in the Villard mansion, stumbling upon a best seller was like winning a lottery. When *Act One*, Moss Hart's memoir of his life in the theater, became a best seller, we celebrated by closing the office and taking the day off. It was like having inherited a fortune to publish James Michener and John O'Hara, who produced best sellers with regularity. Every major house could count on three or four popular writers like these to produce best sellers consistently. But the solid foundation — the accumulated capital — that publishers relied on was their backlists of books that sold year after year. It was these books that proclaimed a firm's financial strength and its cultural standing: a source of pride which more than compensated the owners and their staffs for the marginal profits and low wages typical of the industry.

For authors, it was an honor to join the glittering backlists of houses like Random House, Knopf, or Viking, or smaller firms of equal distinction, such as Farrar, Straus and Giroux and W.W. Norton. But this too has now changed as most publishing houses have become indistinct in their conglomerate settings. Though some authors remain loyal to their editors, on whose advice they depend, most now

rely upon their agents to sell their books at auction. For many of these agents the only significant difference among publishers is how much they will pay for popular writers or for books of topical interest that chain-store customers are likely to buy on impulse or because they have seen their authors on television. The advantage to authors is obvious, but many writers, especially promising beginners, are likely to suffer in the long run when their sales fall short of expectations and publishers become wary of their future projects. Today if an author spent the night on my office couch he would be evicted by the security staff. Authors no longer arrive unannounced. They are screened by guards in the lobby and given name tags to wear on their lapels.

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Such name brand best-selling authors as Tom Clancy, Michael Crichton, Stephen King, Dean Koontz, and John Grisham, whose faithful readers are addicted to their formulaic melodramas, no more need publishers to edit and publicize their books than Nabisco needs Julia Child to improve and publicize Oreos. Name brand authors need publishers only to print and advertise their books and distribute them to the chains and other mass outlets, routine tasks that all publishers manage equally well. Should publishers cease to exist — a

likely possibility sooner or later if not a certainty — these functions could be performed equally well by independent contractors available for hire: production consultants, publicity agencies, and distribution services.

When today's conglomerates learn, as their predecessors did, that book publishing is a high-risk, low-margin business, and new investors cannot be found to take their place; when, in other words, publishers cease to exist in their present untenable form, name brand writers with the help of their agents or business managers may become their own publishers, keeping the entire proceeds from the sale of their books, net of production, advertising, and distribution costs. To retain these powerful authors publishers already forego much of their normal profit, or incur severe losses, by paying royalty guarantees far greater than can be recouped from sales. As a result publishers' profits from books by these best-selling authors, if there are any after the unearned portion of the guarantee has been deducted from revenues, often amount to little more than a modest fee for services. Given the negligible value that publishers add to these assured best sellers in today's brand-driven marketplace, these fees are a fair reward.

In effect name brand authors are already their own publishers, for whom their nominal publishers are a vestigial, nonessential convenience, beneficia-

ries of inertia on the part of agents who are reluctant to forego the security of a publisher's guarantee and unlikely to risk the next step by separating their fortunate handful of stars entirely from their nominal publishers. When the conglomerates tire of overpaying these star performers, their agents may choose either to produce their clients' books themselves or risk losing them to business managers who will do the job for them. According to *The New York Times*, several name brand film stars, including Leonardo DiCaprio, Kevin Costner, and Robin Williams, have recently left their agents and hired business managers to create their own production companies rather than sign with studios or independent producers on traditional terms. To prevent conflicts of interest the Screen Actors Guild has denied agents the right to perform this function for their clients, a prohibition confirmed by California law. But under pressure from agents fearful of losing their clients the guild has considered abandoning this position so that agents too may now become their clients' producers. Film stars must nevertheless hire studios to provide technical services for their own productions, and for this reason few actors are likely to become their own producers. But the business managers of name brand writers need only contract with production and distribution services or make use of new electronic technologies to publish their clients' books.

13v It is not only the few predictable best-selling authors who may eventually find that they no longer need publishers. So far the publishing conglomerates have permitted their various imprints to bid against one another to acquire desirable authors, but they may soon tire of this extravagant concession to the illusion of independence whose *reductio ad absurdum* would be to permit editors within a single imprint to compete with one another in the same way. When the conglomerates end this irrational practice, enterprising agents, no longer able to extract excessive sums for their clients at auction, may be tempted to create, with the help of editors and publicists, websites from which their clients' work can be sold directly to readers. Some literary agencies with their rosters of loyal clients may therefore become what Random House had once been when our authors made themselves at home in the Villard mansion. Who will then represent authors in negotiations with their former agents is an interesting question but not a worrisome one. Old dogs however are not good learners. Though Stephen King's enterprising agent has recently joined forces with Simon and Schuster to sell King's new book in electronic form, it seems more likely that independent entrepreneurs or existing publishers, rather than agents, will create literary websites for this purpose.

## 3.

13r Until the new technologies on which this future depends are widely available in convenient form, publishers who had once patiently nurtured their authors' careers as part of their literary capital will remain short-term gamblers, betting, often rashly, on titles they hope will prove faddish for a season or two, often without regard to their intrinsic worth or long-term prospects. This demoralizing inversion of values has not been a matter of choice on the part of book publishers but the result of a profound cultural transformation with its roots in the post-war suburban migration and the cultural homogenization that resulted. This transformation was well underway thirty years ago when Random House migrated three blocks to the east to its new quarters on Third Avenue. The dominance of bookstore chains dependent on a regular supply of best sellers and the consequent devolution of once proud publishing houses into units of impersonal corporations is not the work of thoughtless people or malign forces but of morally neutral market conditions — especially the high occupancy costs of mall premises — that demand rapid turnover of undifferentiated products, rates of turnover that are incompatible with the long, slow, and often erratic lives of important books.

14v The great postwar transformation from city to suburb that created these conditions has, after a half-century, begun to play itself out, or, as Marxists might say, has become the victim of internal contradictions created by emerging technologies in conflict with older forms of production. The old technologies of internal combustion and mass marketing that created the homogeneous suburban marketplace and its chain bookstores are being challenged by technologies that foreshadow a highly decentralized marketplace offering the possibility of nearly infinite choice to buyers at innumerable remote locations. As Marxists might also say, these new forms of production are likely to create new economic relationships, for example by providing greater intimacy between writers and readers who will no longer need publishers or traditional booksellers to bring them together.

These new technologies will also test the human capacity to distinguish value from a wilderness of choice, but humanity has always faced this dilemma and solved it well enough over time. The World Wide Web offers access to any would-be writer who may or may not have something to say and know how to say it. Several literary websites that have so far emerged are in effect vanity presses, willing to publish anything, regardless of quality, provided the author pays. It is highly improbable that from this clutter works of value will emerge. But proven

talent will coalesce in particular venues as it always has. Distinguished websites, like good bookstores, will attract readers accordingly. The filter that distinguishes value is a function of human nature, not of particular technologies.

14r An example of these new technologies is machinery that can scan, digitize, and store permanently virtually any text ever created so that other machines can retrieve this content and reproduce copies on demand instantly anywhere in the world either in electronic form, downloaded for a fee onto a so-called e-book or similar device, or printed and bound for a few dollars a copy, indistinguishable in appearance from conventionally manufactured paperbacks. Machines capable of printing and binding these digitized texts are already deployed by Ingram, the leading American book wholesaler, and are now being placed in the Barnes and Noble distribution centers and in publishers' warehouses; but future, less expensive versions can be housed in public libraries, schools and universities, and perhaps even in post offices and other convenient places — Kinko's and Staples, for example — where readers can download digitized texts in electronic form or as printed copies, bypassing retail bookstores. The availability of these machines is limited only by their cost and room to store paper.

The advantage to readers in diverse locations who would need only to provide their credit cards

and the appropriate serial numbers to order any text ever written is evident. Readers in Ulan Bator, Samoa, Accra, and Nome will have the same access to books as readers in Berkeley and Cambridge. Since practically every book can be digitized, no book need ever go out of print and readers in search of a particular book, or even specific parts of a book or parts of several books assembled to order, will no longer be frustrated by the mandated turnover requirements of bookstore chains or by the triage performed by publishers' marketing staffs that reflects these requirements.

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Though books manufactured in very small quantities or one at a time by these machines will cost more to produce than factory made books, their ultimate cost to readers will be less, since publishers' distribution costs and retail markups will not figure in their price. Readers may prefer browsing in bookshops as they may prefer the ambiance of a restaurant to a takeout pizza, but the convenience of these machines in thousands of locations with access to potentially limitless virtual inventories, catalogued, annotated, and searchable electronically, will profoundly affect current book marketing practice, to say nothing of the effect on readers and writers.

Recently Scribner, a division of Simon and Schuster, in a joint venture with Stephen King's own publishing company, Philtrum Press, offered for sale exclusively over the Internet for a limited time at \$2.50 per copy King's new 16,000-word ghost story, *Riding the Bullet*, which readers could download onto their handheld readers or directly onto their computers by means of various software programs, including one called Glassbook, which reproduces a traditionally designed printed page and permits readers to magnify text, highlight words, bookmark important passages, and add marginal notes. Glassbook and similar programs also provide copyright protection to authors and publishers, which assures that consumers will be able to reproduce only the working copy for which they have paid, while permitting them to lend or give their copy away as they would any other book. By the end of its first day on sale, 400,000 requests had been received for King's story. Though only 10,000 or so handheld electronic reading devices are currently in use, the technological infrastructure which gives authors unmediated access to readers is already above the horizon. The rest is up to authors, their agents, and their publishers.

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Far more profound than their impact on writers, readers, and publishers will be the effect of these and other new technologies on the culture itself. Dante's decision seven hundred years ago to write

his great poem not in Latin but in what he called the vulgar eloquence — Italian, the language of the people — and Gutenberg's invention in the following century of movable type are landmarks in the secularization of literacy and the liberalization of society as well as an affront to the hegemony of priests and tyrants. The impact of today's emerging technologies promises to be no less revolutionary, perhaps more so. The technology of the printing press enhanced the value of literacy, encouraged widespread learning, and became the sine qua non of modern civilization. New technologies will have an even greater effect, narrowing the notorious gap between the educated rich and the unlettered poor and distributing the benefits as well as the hazards of our civilization to everyone on earth.

Greater literacy will not reduce the human capacity for mischief any more than Martin Heidegger's philosophical learning kept him from supporting the Nazis, a dilemma that philosophers might explore further. Nonetheless, the spread of learning is good in itself. That these technologies have emerged just as the publishing industry has fallen into terminal collapse is providential, one might even say miraculous. For contemporary deists, the timely arrival of the World Wide Web may replace the watch found in the desert as evidence of a divine maker.

## 4.

Until these new technologies become commonplace and easy to use, publishing conglomerates comprised of the ghostly imprints of bygone firms will continue to seek profits by shedding redundant facilities, but they will eventually confront the constraints on profits that publishers have always faced. When they do, they will either contract or collapse under their own weight as their managers discover that a *mélange* of imprints within a single firm compounds the risks and inefficiencies that are intrinsic to the work. Trade book publishing has always depended on the generosity of patrons and the under-compensated devotion of employees and owners. It has never rewarded investors looking for normal returns, which is why the entertainment conglomerates — CBS, ABC, RCA, MCA, Universal — that acquired such distinguished houses as Henry Holt, G.P. Putnam, and Random House, including Alfred A. Knopf, in the 1970s and 1980s, deluded by the false promise of synergy, eventually found them a burden on their balance sheets and disgorged them.

The million-copy sales of a few name brand best-selling authors led these conglomerates to believe incorrectly that general book publishing is a predictable, mass market business, like selling soap or

razor blades or movies. Between 1986 and 1996 the share of all books sold represented by the thirty top best sellers nearly doubled as retail concentration increased. But within roughly the same period 63 percent of the one hundred best-selling titles were written by a mere six writers — Tom Clancy, John Grisham, Stephen King, Dean Koontz, Michael Crichton, and Danielle Steele — a much greater concentration than in the past and a mixed blessing to publishers who sacrifice much of their normal profit, and often incur losses, to keep powerful authors like these. But name brand best-selling authors may hereafter follow King's innovation to its logical next step and exploit their electronic rights without the help of their publishers. Simon and Schuster's press release rejoices innocently that the electronic distribution of King's new book "bypasses the traditional yearlong publishing cycle," but future electronic books by best-selling authors may bypass publishers altogether.

The atypical sales of these popular writers constitute an entirely different business from the fragmented, idiosyncratic, and unpredictable publication of all other books. Many books in this broader category also become best sellers, but on a much smaller scale. For these books, to sell 100,000 copies is remarkable. Thousands of other titles addressed to specialized interests sell far fewer copies. As these earlier conglomerates discovered, the excessive roy-

alty guarantees demanded by the authors of predictable best sellers render their profitability problematic while the profitability of books in the broader category is made problematic by the unpredictability of their sales. When the conglomerators of the 1970s and 1980s found that instead of acquiring a stable of star performers, they had become a source of high-risk capital for the acquisition of future titles by their component publishers, they abandoned the field. Their successors may do the same.

General Electric, a famously well-run company, exercised such prudence when it bought RCA in 1986 and immediately expelled two divisions that didn't meet its standard of profitability: a poultry grower and Random House. Twelve years later Advance Publications, the next owner of Random House, came to the same conclusion. The overseas media empires that have since acquired the remains of these publishing firms may soon find that the electronic exploitation of their back-lists is their only profitable asset. But these back-lists may stagnate should authors follow King's example and sell their future works to their readers directly, as Dickens sold his novels chapter by chapter in his own magazine, *Household Words*, or as Whitman sold his self-published 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, or, for that matter, as Shakespeare produced his own plays at the Globe. A generation ago authors often earned large sums by selling prepublication rights to their

work to mass magazines: The *Saturday Evening Post*, *Collier's*, and so on, a practice that originated in the nineteenth century when mass circulation magazines first appeared. Television destroyed this market, but so-called first-serial rights may become profitable again when website distribution becomes routine and improved technologies provide easy access to the Internet.

18v New technologies will radically change the way books are distributed but they will not displace the essential work of editing and publicity. Manuscripts are turned into books only by hand, one step at a time. This work may take years so that when the book finally appears — if it does: some never do; the process is fraught with hazards and disappointment — the editor's emotions are almost as much committed to the outcome as the author's. For books of lasting value there is no use hurrying this work for the sake of a schedule or a budget. Profits and orderly procedures, to the extent they can be achieved, are essential to the work, but they are not its purpose any more than breathing is the purpose of life or a scorecard is the purpose of a tennis match.

Except for the questionable advantage of computers over typewriters and inkhorns, new technologies will not simplify or enhance this process, which is often as improvisational as writing itself. The decision to accept or reject a manuscript, the

strategies of revision and publicity, the choice of art work and typography when a satisfactory manuscript is finally produced, the emotional and financial support of authors: this can be done only by human beings endowed with the peculiar qualities that a successful publisher or editor needs, no matter how the technological environment transforms the rest of the publishing process. Except in rare cases, authors will always need editorial valets to polish their syntax and replenish their purses, share their anguish and their joy, and submerge their own egos for the sake of their author's fame.

18r It is less clear how new technologies will transform retail book-selling as the chains in their oversaturated marketplace face competition from Internet booksellers and the prospect of limitless virtual inventories available on demand in electronic or printed form at random locations. These factors have already discouraged investment in the retail chains, whose share prices have stagnated at low levels. Nonetheless, a civilization without retail booksellers is unimaginable. Like shrines and other sacred meeting places bookstores are essential artifacts of human nature. The feel of a book taken from the shelf and held in the hand is a magical experience, linking writer to reader. But to compete with the World Wide Web bookstores of the future will be different from the *mass-oriented* superstores that now dominate the retail marketplace. Tomorrow

row's stores will have to be what the Web cannot be: tangible, *intimate*, and local: communal shrines, perhaps with coffee bars offering pleasure and wisdom in the company of others who share one's interests amid well-chosen inventories where the book one wants can always be found and surprises and temptations spring from every shelf.

## 5.

19v The old histories of East Hampton mention a silver-voiced peddler named Mason Locke Weems who had once been a preacher and still called himself Parson. On an autumn day not long after the death of President Washington in 1799, Weems rode into this highly literate Long Island village with a drum strapped to his back. He placed himself under one of the great elms that lined the village green, unlimbered his drum, and after a few thumps he had attracted a crowd. It was probably a Philadelphia printer named John Ormrod, who now and then took to the road as a bookseller, who had told Weems that Federalist East Hampton was a good market for the book he was planning to write about George Washington. In the previous year Weems and Ormrod had been hired to sell subscriptions to the five-volume life of Washington written by John

Marshall, the great third Chief Justice, and his fellow jurist, the President's son, Bushrod. Weems had been assigned the unpromising anti-Federalist South. Now he had come to Federalist East Hampton to find subscribers for his own, mostly fictional life of Washington with its cherry tree and hatchet and dollar thrown across the Rappahannock.

Weems did not need a publisher to sell his book on the East Hampton village green. He publicized and sold his book himself, covering his costs and earning his profit directly from future readers who would eventually be sent their copies by post. Perhaps Weems also relied on these future readers for editorial help, taking note of the inventions they liked and shaping his book accordingly. 19r When Weems visited East Hampton, the publishing industry in the United States had not yet been born. There were printers in the important towns and cities, but East Hampton had no bookseller. Like Weems, many writers in those days either sold their books themselves — according to Marshall's biographer, Weems was a storyteller who could charm an audience with the fiddle as well as the drum — or if they lacked Weems's magnetism they arranged with others to do the job for them, as John Marshall and Bushrod Washington did when they hired a Federalist newspaper publisher in Richmond who in turn hired Ormrod and Weems to go on the road.

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Soon writers and readers will meet again on a worldwide village green where writers may once more beat their drums or hire a Weems to drum up business for them. On the World Wide Web future storytellers and their readers can mingle at leisure and talk at length. Writers of cookbooks, garden books, regional guides, and other reference books and directories can, if they like, compose their texts interactively with their future readers as Weems probably did with his. So may poets and other storytellers who will find at the end of the process that buyers, identifiable by their email addresses, await the finished work in either printed or electronic form or in forms yet to be devised. But guides, directories, catalogs, almanacs, and so on, which are out of date on the day they are published, need never be printed at all. Instead, their data can be continuously updated and retrieved electronically as needed.

The best advertising for any book is word of mouth. For this the global village offers limitless scope. But the Web will be more than a platform from which books are promoted and sold. Some books will be composed interactively on the Web and others will be compiled to order from random sources and delivered electronically in a single pack-

age or in periodic revisions. Interactive curricula can be transmitted from a single site to students in distant places. So can medical, legal, and financial advice be addressed interactively to individual users. For historians and other scholars the prospects of multidimensional research are beguiling.

With books no longer imprisoned for life within fixed bindings, the opportunities are endless for the creation of new, useful, and profitable products by Internet publishers. For Walt Whitman and his ever-changing editions of *Leaves of Grass* the Web would have been ideal. So would it have been for *samizdat* writers in the former Soviet Union and will be for their counterparts under today's and tomorrow's tyrannies. Among the many tyrannies to be overcome by the World Wide Web will be the turnover requirements of retail booksellers. On the infinitely expandable shelves of the World Wide Web, there will be room for an infinite variety of books. The invention of movable type created opportunities for writers that could barely be imagined in Gutenberg's day. The opportunities that await writers in the near future are immeasurably greater.

The obstacles imposed between readers and writers by traditional publishing technologies — a system of improvisations accumulated over generations from the vagaries and impasses of obsolete forms of production and distribution — will wither

away. The global village green will not be paradise. It will be undisciplined, polymorphous, and polyglot, as has been our fate and our milieu ever since the divine autocracy showed its muscle by toppling the Tower of Babel. Over the objections of countless local gods and their vicars, writers have ever since improvised many imperfect towers of their own: clearings in the forest, marketplaces in Athens, catacombs in Rome, graffiti on dungeon walls, *samizdat* in Siberian camps, and they will do so hereafter with unprecedented scope on the World Wide Web.

On this point, there are strong grounds for optimism. The critical faculty that selects meaning from chaos is part of our instinctual equipment and so is the gift for creating and recreating civilizations and their rules without external guidance. Human beings have a genius for finding their way, for making orderly markets, distinguishing quality, and assigning value. This faculty can be taken for granted. There is no reason to fear that the awesome diversity of the World Wide Web will overwhelm it. In fact, the Web's diversity will enlarge

these powers, or so one's experience of humankind permits one to hope.

Whether publishers adapt to this opportunity with foresight or let it fall upon them as it will is unclear. What is clear is that on the World Wide Web publishers' tasks can be reduced to an essential handful: editorial support, publicity, design, production, and financing. For these functions size confers no advantage and at a certain magnitude becomes a nuisance. My guess is that future publishing units will be small, though they may be related to a central financial source. To the extent that writers deliver the contents of their minds directly to those of their readers over the Web as Stephen King has done, such traditional publishing work as marketing, sales, shipping, and warehousing together with their bureaucracies and inefficiencies can be minimized and assigned to specialist firms. Book publishing may therefore become once more a cottage industry of diverse, creative, autonomous units, or so there is now reason to believe.

*Finis*

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## About the Author

Jason Epstein is the former editorial director of Random House, the cofounder of *The New York Review of Books*, and the founder of the Library of America. With over fifty years in book publishing, Mr. Epstein has received several awards in recognition of the contributions he has made to literature and to book publishing. He lives in New York City.

