

❖ **Sherman Young — *The Book is Dead: Long Live the Book***

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It's been more than fifteen years since British designer Malcolm Garrett famously declared that the printed book was not dying, it was already dead. In his ominously titled article, 'The Book is Dead' published in *Graphics World* in 1991, Garrett argued that the traditional print delivery system was outdated, expensive and limited in reach. If the fundamental nature of the book was to continue to have resonance, he maintained, graphic designers would need to develop innovative publishing formats and outlets, principally through an engagement with electronic and multimedia technologies.

Almost two decades later, Macquarie University academic Sherman Young has reached a similar verdict in his new book which aims to explore the current status and fate of books and book culture. In an echo of Garrett's title to which Young curiously does not make reference, the self-consciously titled monograph *The Book is Dead: Long Live the Book* reads like part coroner's report on the book as printed object, and part manifesto on its re-birthing in the digital age.

Young's central thesis is that the book as a physical presence has reached its use-by-date, and that reading printed books has, in turn, become a niche activity. While reading has not died, book culture has been forced to gravitate elsewhere, principally towards online technologies. As a self-confessed book lover, Young wants to preserve the culture of books. He wants to salvage and re-package what he calls the 'essence of *what a book should do*' (p. 20), which is to transmit ideas through the art of a 'slower conversation' (p. 35). For the book to live again, the author augurs for a two stage 'cosmic disturbance' (p. 3). The first stage would separate the book from its object and its connection with a material presence, while the second would re-purpose it via new cultural and technological interfaces specifically designed to re-connect readers and writers with the content that links them.

As any reader who has followed the range of debates informing the future of the book will know, the proclamation intimated by Young's title is hardly new. Nor is the push for the development of a brave new digital literary world. What *is* original and provocative about Young's work however, is the historical and cultural backbone that informs his argument. For unlike other commentators who cite technology and the rise and rise of new media forms as responsible for the book's death, Young points the finger instead at the publishing industry. It is not technology that has killed the book, it is the lure of commerce coupled with the industry's failure to capitalise on the way technology has sparked seismic shifts in reading culture. The big claim in *The Book is Dead* is that the book trade is 'about selling objects, not ideas' (p. 10), and that until this changes book culture will continue to face a dismal future.

It is here that Young is at his best, for while *The Book is Dead* seems determined to position itself within the new media future, this text is far more successful as an analysis of the current state of book culture and the way the publishing industry has come to limit the dissemination of ideas by privileging commerce over culture. In a chapter likely to irk some readers and publishers, Young claims that most published books are not books at all. They are 'anti-books', the 'boy bands of the publishing world', texts that have been commissioned on the whiff of a commercial promise borne out of a cynical marketing or media tie-in (p. 50). The pressures of corporate ownership combined with the costs associated with printing, marketing and stocking books has meant that publishers are increasingly driven by the bottom-line rather than by issues of

heart and mind.

As a result, 'real' books – books that promote engagement, discussion and reflection, or what Young calls 'internalactivity' – have suffered a decline (p. 31). Both new and more established authors are finding it increasingly difficult to compete with Jamie Oliver, Posh Beckham and Paris Hilton dominating publishers' attention.

Welcome then 'The Heavenly Library' – an environmentally and culturally friendly digital alternative to the polluting and economical challenges that stem from traditional book distribution. The message here is loud and clear: separate the book from its form and book culture will be re-energised. By liberating the book from the shackles of print culture, and embracing a 'future without the codex' (p. 165-66) Young wants to do for book culture what the i-pod and the digital music revolution did for music. Just like the far-reaching, endless space of online music catalogues, the Heavenly Library would stock digital versions of everything written. Books would be downloaded onto portable readers – a device that has yet to be perfected – and people would be able to transport thousands of books on buses and planes. The substantial reduction in costs would mean that more books would be published, old books would be revived, and book culture would be re-invigorated through the opportunities afforded by computer-based communications such as social networking sites, discussion groups, etc.

Young's vision for a Heavenly Library is exciting and, given the way we now access music, even inevitable. However, it should be noted that it is also loaded with ambiguity. Throughout his manifesto the author doesn't quite make clear where publishers and editors would fit into the brave new digital landscape. And given that publishing companies would still need to make a tidy profit, and not just stay afloat, it is difficult to determine how new authors might be afforded greater opportunity unless they publish themselves. And while Young suggests that the ease of uploading content *would* enable this form of publication, one wonders about the place of editing, proofreading and slush-control given the stringent criterion he accords to (real) books not 'anti-books'.

Still, the flip-side is that one of the great wonders of a Heavenly Library, whether musical or text-based, is the choice it affords the user. One reader's Chekhov will always be another reader's Beckham. A Heavenly Library, as it is envisaged here, would give the reader a greater right to choose and, concurrently, to direct and reflect both macro and micro reading and thinking trends. For, as Young asserts throughout *The Book is Dead*, we are no longer passive consumers. We have become participants in culture debates and cultural production. By opening up the range and availability of a broader range of texts, from the old to the new, the Heavenly Library would allow readers to more actively shape book culture. It would certainly enable a greater number of writers to finally find their audience, no matter how small that readership might be.

And for those who might lament the loss of holding that first edition with its associated thrill of smell, touch and texture, Young has a response that should quieten many. It is an argument that is increasingly difficult to counter. It is worth quoting him on this at length:

A dead-tree book is just that. A dead tree. But the environmental impact of the printed object goes beyond the mere absence of another tree. Not only are books printed on paper, but they are shipped, sometimes halfway around the world. By the time it reaches its reader, the average paperback has cost the equivalent of three kilograms (over 6.6 pounds) of carbon dioxide emissions. Then add in the industry's sale or return policies, and a substantial proportion of those paperbacks are then *shipped back* to the publisher, who might warehouse them. Or pulp them. Dave Reay, author of *Climate Change Begins at Home*, suggests that every year, the UK publishing industry "in effect, puts an extra 100 000 cars on the road" (157-58)

Working from Young's criteria *The Book is Dead* is certainly a (real) book. It is well-written, engaging and challenging. While some of its prophetic visions may still need tweaking, this is still a timely and provocative book which provides a new way of thinking about book culture and the future of reading.

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