

## *The persistence of print*

CANADIAN WRITER Stephen Henighan has drawn attention in *Geist* to the deleterious effects on Canadian creative writing from the sophisticated tracking of point-of-sale book sales data. The long-standing model of publishers supporting writers in their early and mid career as they hone their skills and build an audience has been eroded by publishers fixating on the sales record (in most cases underwhelming) of the writer's most recent book.

Henighan suggests that this fixation has resulted in publishers' enthusiasm for first books, which have no sobering sales numbers to dampen expectations. The trend of publishers abandoning good writers results, says Henighan, in the suppression of "countless first-rate books in favour of wooden imitations of last year's bestsellers . . . designed to persuade intelligent readers that Canadian books are not very interesting after all."<sup>1</sup>

As an aside in his lament on "the disintegration of literary culture," Henighan references "the endless infancy of e-books," and he speculates that "this may be a signal that electronic publishing will not match the dominance and ubiquitousness of print publishing in its heyday."<sup>2</sup> As a librarian who cares about collections, I have spent a good part of the past five years considering the emergence of e-books<sup>3</sup> and all that this entails for readers, authors, publishers and libraries. Since the introduction of the Kindle e-reader in the U.S. market in late 2007, the marketing power of Amazon has resulted in dramatic year-over-year sales growth of e-books, with triple-digit percentage increases the norm. Until 2013, that is.

Up to 2013, Henighan's forecast would have struck many as quixotic, as e-books appeared to be on an inexorable path to dominance in trade publishing.<sup>4</sup> That year's e-book sales data from the U.S. and Canada (arguably the most mature e-book markets) have been described as "levelled off," "plateaued" and "matured." Considered year to year, here are recent stats for first-quarter e-book sales growth for U.S. trade-published titles.

(The first-quarter sales are relatively high, reflecting the popularity of e-readers as Christmas gifts.)

2010	+ 252%
2011	+ 159%
2012	+ 28%
2013	+ 5%

Although it is easy to get caught up in the hype surrounding the "inevitably" of e-book dominance,<sup>5</sup> it is important to understand that print-on-paper book publishing is still the preferred format for general readers. In 2013, trade e-books constituted 27 percent of revenues for U.S. trade publishers (17 percent in Canada, a less mature e-book market). While Henighan's skepticism about the "dominance and ubiquitousness" of e-books is perhaps justified by recent data, it is certain that digital publishing is integral to the financial sustainability of publishing, for as long as the boomer generation walks the earth at least.

And while e-books are unlikely to overtake print-book sales in total, the format is dominant in genre fiction, including romance novels. This is reflected in the sharp decline in mass-market paperback sales. The gift market, especially for Christmas, is a major motivator for book purchases, allowing categories such as cookbooks to maintain their print sales. The convenience of e-books is no substitute for the beautifully produced illustrated book, especially as a gift.

One intriguing example of the ongoing appeal of the physical object is the decision by *Pitchfork*, one of the most popular and successful music sites on the Internet, to produce a print journal after 18 years of virtual existence. The *Pitchfork* site receives 240,000 visits a day and has more than 1.5 million unique readers a month. *The Pitchfork Review* No. 1 appeared in early 2014 with the tag line "Unprintable since 1996" and a U.S. list price of \$19.96.

When deciding whether it should expand into the print-on-paper world, *Pitchfork* did not settle for a conventional magazine format, but rather set out to produce a beautifully designed publication with lavish illustrations and photography along with minimal advertising. The postmodern feeling is underscored by articles celebrating jukeboxes and the British weekly music press. It is worth quoting the editorial introduction at length, as it captures—for me, at least—the

undying appeal of print on paper for even one of the most successful digital publishers:

We love the speed and community of the internet, but there's so much noise (and far too few filters) that important stories can get lost . . . We wanted an opportunity to give some pieces a second life, one that won't be lost to Google searches and Twitter archives. And we also think this format is the perfect environment for presenting new writing and visual content that stands the test of time. This publication features contributions from some of today's finest writers, illustrators, and photographers. Their work should be studied, considered, and enjoyed, not deleted . . .

We encourage you to set this issue down, get up and get a cup of coffee or tea, and come back to it, later on. We want you to take it with you on the train or to the beach. Eventually, we want you to place it on your bookshelf, perhaps lend it to your friends, tear out its pages, and (maybe) one day pass it on to your children as a time capsule of sorts, reflecting a four-month chunk of time in the 21st century.<sup>6</sup>

The downsides of the physical object even form the basis of the promotion for the print version: "Subscribing is like following us on Tumblr only thicker and more expensive."

In a recent article in *The Verge* on e-book preservation (or more properly, the lack thereof), Adi Robertson writes about the threat to our cultural record represented by niche publishing. She writes: "Genres that were considered juvenile or unimportant in their day—pulp science fiction, romance novels, comic books—have since proved to have lasting literary value or cultural importance."<sup>7</sup> These types of genres are seldom collected by libraries, and

the extent to which they are now represented in research library collections is thanks to the efforts of individual collectors who did seek them out and ultimately donated them.

As previously noted, e-books are proving to be very successful in these types of "disposable" genres, and they are next to impossible to collect and preserve in their digital form. As Robertson writes: "Kindles and copyright . . . may be killing the collector." For this reason if no other, we should give thanks when the virtual migrates to the tangible, as in the case of *The Pitchfork Review*.

1. Stephen Henighan, "The BookNet Dictatorship," *Geist*, Fall/Winter 2010, 124.
2. Ibid.
3. "E-book," "eBook," "ebook"—take your pick.
4. The term "trade publishing" describes the publishing of books to be sold to individual self-motivated readers through a variety of trade channels, as opposed to scholarly, professional or textbook publishing, which targets special markets.
5. The *New York Times* recently had to run a correction to the statement that trade e-book sales had surpassed the sales of print books in the U.S. In fact, this was referencing Amazon's sales, a very different sales distribution than the market at large, even given Amazon's dominance as a book retailer.
6. "Welcome to *The Pitchfork Review*," *The Pitchfork Review*, no. 1, Winter 2014, 9.
7. Adi Robertson, "The Fight to Save Endangered E-books," *The Verge*, <http://www.theverge.com/2014/5/9/5688146/the-fight-to-save-endangered-ebooks>.

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