

The Future of the Book

Wood engraver and book artist GEORGE A. WALKER provides perspective on the book as persistent art form and artifact in the digital age.

IF YOU'RE READING THIS you are probably not watching TV, working on your computer or playing loud music. Then again, perhaps that's exactly what you're doing. If you haven't participated in any of those cultural pastimes, you're in the minority. The free time that the average person spends with a book has diminished greatly since the invention of radio, television and the Internet.

Our relationship with the book has changed most dramatically within the last century. How, what and where we choose to read has become closely linked to new advances in communication technology. E-books, websites, electronic paper and iPad tablets are fast becoming part of our reading experience, which leads us to the question: Where does the traditional paper book fit into this equation? Does it fit in at all?

I think it does have a place, but I'd be a fool if I didn't see how its function is changing on the horizon. Artists have a role to play in redefining the meaning of the book and can challenge the concept of the book as information vehicle and container of knowledge. They can introduce the public to the value of books through work that brings attention to the culture of the book. This is easier said than done, as the pressure to create with new technology lures us to other forms of communication media and away from the book.

The average person sees an ocean of common-looking books on shelves and in piles and stacks; books are everywhere. They are taken for granted for their form and function. The challenge for the artist is to see what everyone else sees, but to think about it and see it differently. That's the foundation of original thought: to be truly aware of your own time and its limitations and conventions and then begin to

think "outside of the box." It can never be easy to be original; it's less stressful to blend into the world than to challenge the status quo.

The book as art is not dead, obsolete or vanishing; it is merely on the path of change that we all must succumb to. We would realize this if we would only read between the lines. I like books I can hold in my hands that don't plug in or run low on battery power and then break after five years of use. The printed book is tangible—we can possess it—and that's a key reason why we need physical books.

All electronic books are simulations of printed books, which are simulations of manuscripts, which are simulations of the ideas of the author. If you want to read it you can download the digital file, but to possess it you need the object itself. The e-book merely offers you a licence to read it. Yet we are physical beings who need the presence of objects and things to form meaning in our lives.

You can loan a printed book to your friend, write your name or paste your *ex libris* on its endleaf, experience the grandeur of a large folio page or the delicacy of a miniature book printed on onionskin. Best of all, you can store it on a shelf for 10 years and take it down and all the information is still intact.

How will artists, book designers and publishers reimagine the book format and its cultural future? When I think of pushing the boundaries of the book into new places, I think of the work of artists like Lise Melhorne-Boe and her sculptural book project *High Heels*, where the pages are the insoles of handmade paper shoes, or Ann Yen Lam and her *Chocolate Box*, where the text is concealed inside a selection of delicious-looking paper chocolates.



High Heels by Lise Melhorne-Boe, Transformer Press (1983). Explores women's stories about wearing high heels.



Margaret Lock's hand-printed book of Leo Tolstoy's How Much Land Does a Man Need? (1986).

But I am also reminded of the fine press work of Margaret Lock and her edition of Leo Tolstoy's *How Much Land Does a Man Need?*, a non-adhesive binding printed on handmade paper, illustrated with exquisite woodcuts and housed in a wooden box that can only be appreciated by the sensation of touch. Books of this nature will not translate easily to an electronic simulation.

Of course, in some distant future, when our minds are completely uploaded to the computer simulation, we might experience the physical sensations of the book as if we were actually holding it—perhaps—but it seems a far cry from reality. And why must everything be a simulation of reality when it takes less energy to experience our natural world?

E.M. Forster anticipated this evolution away from our physical world in his short story "The Machine Stops" (1909). Forster's story describes a society that has lost its ability to live on the surface of the Earth. Everyone lives in isolation below ground in a cell in front of an omnipotent machine that provides for all their bodily and mental needs. Hmm—have we really changed much in the 100 years since Forster's ominous vision of the future?

FOR CENTURIES THE custodians of knowledge were an elite and small group who guarded their dominance over religion and commerce. It was the invention of the printing press that finally upset the structure of power. When knowledge is free and accessible, everyone benefits. It is the desperation and fear surrounding the future of the book that perplexes me more than any of the technologies that claim to replace the book. Do people really think that the billions upon billions of printed books that we love so dearly will just vanish and be replaced with an electronic simulator? No—what we are really talking about is the future of reading and writing.

From the history of communication we learn that all of our methods of reading and writing will change; it is in their nature to do so. I for one welcome the digital information age and the death of the cheap paperback and the glut of crap that is printed every year. Instead of wasting paper, perhaps it will be better to publish most things electronically and save the truly special things for the privilege of print.

We've been trying to solve the problem of storing and retrieving information for thousands of years. Some of the systems we've invented have



Chocolate Box by Ann Yen Lam, produced in George Walker's course
The Book as Art at the Ontario College of Art and Design University in winter 2011.

failed to make it to our time, and other methods have had spectacular rediscoveries. Think of the lost writing of Pythagoras of Samos or the marvel of the Rosetta Stone, which unlocked the puzzle of the Egyptian written language.

With each attempt to move our collective knowledge forward, we are faced with the problem of storage and retrieval. How can we record our most cherished information and communicate it to the future without losing too much of the original meaning? If I get to choose how I want to store my work (both visual and written), and I do, I choose to encapsulate it in a proven vessel of printed sheets sewn and cased in—a printed book! Digital media are a very

poor archive of knowledge, but printed books are a simple and durable archive and will survive.

In the last pages of Ray Bradbury's dystopic *Fahrenheit 451*, we discover that most of the great works of literature have been destroyed, yet there is hope in an underground community where each person assumes the title of a book that they have memorized entirely, preserving each book in memory—people are “books.”

For me the future of the book will depend on how we embrace its unique capabilities to communicate information and provide us with meaningful experiences. There is still a growing interest in the printed book and its flexible format. For example, the graphic novel

and the artist's book, in all their diversity, are positive cultural forces for the printed book. The future of the book is explicitly woven into the tapestry of its own history, and looking forward we will see our stories told in every media conceivable, with the printed book an icon for our collective imaginations.

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↳ George A. Walker is a book artist, associate professor at the Ontario College of Art & Design University, creative director at Firefly Books Ltd. and graphics editor at the Porcupine's Quill. This is an abridged version of the address he gave at Library and Archives Canada in June 2011.



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*George Walker's Book of Hours (2010),
a wordless graphic novel in
99 wood engravings.*

HARD VALUE

The enduring value of the printed word—not just text—was one of the points Toronto bookseller David Michaelides made during a talk at the Toronto ceremony honouring winners of the Alcuin Society Awards for Excellence in Book Design in Canada on October 4, 2010.

Many kinds of books will doubtless soon cease to be published in printed form. Others, better informed than I, have talked about the ethical and technical issues associated with replacing books with software. So I'll touch on the subject only briefly.

Canadian author Cory Doctorow, a former director of the Electronic Frontier Foundation and founder of the U.K.-based Open Rights Group, recently delivered a lecture entitled "Copyright vs. Universal Access" at the Perimeter Institute in Waterloo (it's available for viewing on TVO's Big Ideas website here: bit.ly/bVz0f9). One of the issues Doctorow explores is this: I can lend any of you my favourite book (knowing, of course, that there's a chance I'll never get it back). This is not typically possible with that book's new electronic equivalent.

Format conventions, operating system issues, media durability, copy-protection, rights limitations and device dependence—

just look at the video industry to see how the glorious durability of the book would be undermined. How long will a \$30 Kindle e-book really survive as a functional entity? I have books on my shelves that are four centuries old. They boot without difficulty and, unlike my three-month-old Kobo, they've never needed a firmware update to keep working.

And, Aldus Manutius didn't have to outsource technical support to Zen Desk.

As a related aside, my friend Steven Fowler owns a truly innovative antiquarian bookstore in Toronto called the Monkey's Paw. Steven used to write a column on Word.com called something like "The Archive of Endangered Ephemera." He essentially presented PDFs of obscure printed pieces (tracts and pamphlets) with a contemporary, often ironic perspective.

The ultimate irony, however, is that when Word.com folded, all the digital files were lost when the server was wiped. Steven, of course, still has the original printed pieces and could lay his hands on duplicate original copies of most of them within a week, if asked.

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↳ David Michaelides is the former proprietor of the Toronto bookshop Swiipe.