

# The New Monks

DAVID MICHAELIDES talks to the Alcuin Society about the future of the book in the world of social media.



David Michaelides (photo from [blogto.com](http://blogto.com))

I'D LIKE TO BEGIN by thanking Linda Gustafson and the Alcuin Society for asking me to speak here tonight. There is a surprising and unfortunate lack of communication between the various disciplines within the book industry. Editors, designers and even marketing specialists rarely have contact with independent booksellers, who tend to remain hidden from view behind sales reps and trade agents—particularly in Canada. So, I greatly appreciate the opportunity.

For the majority of you who have no idea who I am, my name is David Michaelides. My career began 30 years ago, with the superlatively unwise decision to quit high school in favour of the glamorous and lucrative world of professional bookselling.

I worked for Marc Glassman at Pages from 1980 to '87 (which actually was a sort of

glamorous time to be on Queen West), and at the same time I worked in the antiquarian trade—for the legendary Marty Avenus at the Village Bookstore, among others.

In 1987, on Black Monday to be precise, I opened my own bookstore, Swipe, specializing in books about graphic design, typography and the like. In 1990, rather than starve, I got a job with Ed Cleary at Cooper and Beatty, Canada's premier trade typographer, opening up the North American affiliate of Eric Speikermann's FontShop. In 1994 I ended up buying the assets of FontShop from a secured creditor (it turns out the '90s weren't the best years for the traditional typesetting business).

From 1994 to its economic obsolescence in 2004, I owned and operated FontShop in Toronto, and made some money for the first

and only time in my life. Last year, having spent everything I ever made at FontShop keeping Swipe open, I sold my bookstore to a consortium of interested parties. So you don't get the wrong impression, despite having cost me every penny I ever made, Swipe has been among the country's most successful independent bookstores through this entire era. Kind of cold comfort. Particularly if you're my wife!

The title, or at least the theme of this talk, is "The Future of the Book in the 140 Character World." In my mind, one of the most telling manifestations of the impact the Internet has had on bookselling, and more generally on literacy, is the fact that, over the past seven years, sales of university reading-list books (canonical works that are not required textbooks, but rather optional reading for humanities students) have completely evaporated. There is a range of reasons for this, not all having to do with creeping illiteracy among the Internet generation. The first is the course pack—a bundle of photocopies given to each student at the beginning of a course. New copyright management agreements and legislation have given institutions the right to provide students with photocopies of only the relevant pages of a book that might previously have made it onto a reading list.

Next, Wikipedia and Google provide a kind of virtual CliffsNotes to a swath of human learning and culture. Students can readily crib the context of an idea, its significance in a broader cultural framework, without having to trouble themselves with actually reading the author's original text, or even understanding the concept itself.

Finally, I am obviously working from a distorted sample. Students are among the most price-sensitive book buyers and among the earliest adopters of online book shopping. So, maybe some of them are buying those reading-list books, just not from independents like Swipe. Not likely though. What I've noticed is that students (and more generally the wider public) are increasingly unwilling to commit to following an argument from thesis, through supporting facts, to a logical conclusion. And that the value of acquiring a broad base of knowledge on which to make informed judgments on a range of subjects is an entirely foreign concept.

"If I need to know something, I can just Google it." With the course pack and Google, taking the time to follow the logic of a book-length argument seems quaint—like sewing your own clothes. What matters now is the metadata. We create a kind of intellectual flow-chart or play a game of six degrees of separation, in which half-understood ideas are strung like beads, in some conventional pattern.

That is, of course, unless the body of knowledge in question relates to some subculture to which an individual wants to belong: graffiti, or knitting, or fixed gear bicycles, or perfect moustaches. In that case encyclopedic knowledge of what is "authentic" is highly valued as a symbol of belonging.

And, of course, the same students who are quick to reference Deleuze, but would never actually take the time to read him, are often compulsive about following every mundane detail of the comings and goings of their Facebook friends, celebrities and Twitter acquaintances. I don't really mean to pick on students—all this is true of a much wider demographic.

And, so what. Kids aren't reading as much today as they used to. They said the same thing about my generation—the first to grow up with ubiquitous television. And it was true. But different.

The new generation reads and creates more text than mine ever did. They can type with their thumbs while skateboarding, for God's sake. It's just that it's not books that they're reading.

It's "text." Scrollable, searchable, hyper-linked "text."

So, if they don't want books, let's just sell them text. Naked, device-independent text files, or traditionally designed page layouts as graphic image files, or some webpage-like hybrid. Viewed on an e-reader, a tablet computer, a traditional monitor or some miracle digital paper.

Unfortunately, in the publishing industry's rush not to be caught flatfooted the same way the music industry was (or at least is widely perceived as having been), there has been a fundamental misapprehension of the central problem of book text versus digital text. The analogy with music formats just doesn't hold. You cannot perform a Fourier transform on a page of text.

To the listener, music is the experience of the variation of air pressure on the tympanic membrane. The local source of this physical force

is indistinguishable and irrelevant. However, the experience of a text is not a physical sensation and the ideas contained in that text are, on so many levels, context dependent.

I know everybody here loves books. Their physical structure: its efficiency, its simplicity and elegance. The book is a near-perfect conduit for the transmission of the text. However, perhaps more significant than the beauty of the design solution is the difference in the psychology of the reader as they approach the physical book versus scrollable, searchable, hyperlinked text.

To even pick up a book is to entertain the notion that one might read it. Cover to cover, as it was conceived by the author. There is an *a priori* understanding that the author of that text chose what to include or not include with the intention of leading the reader somewhere. It is impossible to relate to unconfined text in this way. It is also impossible to assess the heft of a volume, its authority, and the commitment that might be required to read it, when you are only looking at an icon on a virtual desktop or on a file server.

Many "great works" are now available in digital format from Project Gutenberg or Google Books. But while the occasional hearty soul might be inspired to read Koestler's *The Sleepwalkers* or Jane Jacobs' *Life and Death of Great American Cities* on a computer or Kobo screen (and to do so properly, "cover to cover," as these works were conceived), who would be foolish enough now to consider writing a similar text for the new digital medium? Old folks, I suppose. Veterans in denial.

Scrollable, searchable, hyperlinked text has already revolutionized the presentation of large, unbounded data sets. A manual of nursing practice, a building code or the Human Genome—these are tasks for which the book has always been ill-suited. And doubtless the medium will engender new literary forms. Seas of fictional prose drifting into one another. Never-ending streams of recursive blog-text, completely impossible to divide into discrete works or 140-character quips. Who knows, really?

Though, wouldn't Oscar Wilde have had an awesome Twitter feed.

It seems rather unlikely that most non-fiction written for digital reading will take a form that is analogous to the book, in most important

respects. Despite its reputation, art tends to be a more conservative endeavour than scholarship, and so, in literature, where forms are more thoroughly conventionalized, we will likely continue to see novel and novellas and traditional poetry collections shoehorned into these new reading devices and contexts. For a while at least.

So what options are open to book-loving book creators? Designers, publishers, editors and authors. In a best-selling book on marketing in changing times entitled *Meatball Sundaes*, author Seth Godin used as a key example the failure of famed New York specialty bookseller Murder Inc. in 2006.

*Meatball* was a tremendously popular book with Swipe's client base, and I had this cautionary tale recounted to me by numerous well-meaning well-wishers. Godin's observation was that Murder Inc. continued to try to run a bricks-and-mortar store, selling books to the public, long after the market had no use for the institution. Amazon had made a trip to any out-of-the-way specialty bookshop unnecessary as they, ostensibly, had as broad a selection, available for overnight delivery.

Godin has this more or less right. It is a measure of how hard it is to predict the future of an industry, that 10 years ago it was conventional wisdom that general bookstores and mini-chains were doomed, but that specialty bookstores would be more resilient in the face of competition and price pressure from the majors. In reality, it has turned out that the specialists, with their reliance on deep inventories and destination shoppers, are the vulnerable ones. They are the first to collapse in any market. Neighbourhood generalists, and location-dependent mini-chains, seem more able to struggle along, for the moment.

Godin goes on to suggest that rather than trying to sell a "Meatball Sundae," a product that the market has no use for, regardless of its quality, Murder Inc. should have spun off the part of their business that was still relevant: expert advice and reputation. They should have monetized what booksellers have traditionally given away free: their knowledge and curatorial judgment. Actually, it's really more like innate pomposity. But anyway.

I have heard this idea of monetizing expert knowledge again and again. "Make a move from

bookstore to blog... Google AdSense and Amazon click-throughs will be your revenue streams.”

The idea that an institution such as Murder Inc., or really the entire bookselling profession, could be deemed as having survived based on a few refugees making a few bucks blogging (for as long as Google and Amazon see fit to reward them) is vulgar in the extreme and indicative of just how little the mavins of the new economy understand the foundations of the real economy. To suggest that thousands of bookstores (lively community spaces) and tens of thousands of bookstore jobs should cheerfully be traded for a few dozen poorly paid positions as bloggers, in the service of some giant logistics company or a would-be information monopolist, is truly grotesque.

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*Books are bomb shelters  
for the ideas they contain*

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Take note, there is a similar future being offered to publishers and editors in the world of e-books and digital text. The same smart forces of the new economy are offering you a trade: your place in this grand cultural industry for jobs as bean-counting rights agents, poorly paid talent scouts or mobile-device content developers. If you play along, your role in the dissemination of the written word will be circumscribed to the point that you become irrelevant.

Book designers and copy editors: you'll find a place as proofreaders, hypertext markup technicians and Java app developers. Maybe a lucky few will work as “experience designers” for reading devices. In place of layout and typography you'll be coding text, serif or sans, and setting text-anchors on screen-resolution images.

Make no mistake, Amazon and Google want you all to starve. They are not ambivalent, they are unequivocally antagonistic. Amazon, Google and Kobo have exactly the same level of concern for the survival of the traditional skills and wisdom of the publishing industry, and its related specialties, as Apple has in the survival of what used to be called the record industry. And with Apple moving into the books, I suppose we'll all

get a chance to experience that first-hand too.

So, how is the book going to survive? You are going to save it. Booksellers have been defending and promoting books on the front lines for two decades and we're done. With the exception of a few rich folks' vanity businesses, there will be no independent bookstores in Canada's major cities within a decade. So it's up to book designers, typographers, editors and, above all, publishers to fight the economic forces that would consolidate all human knowledge and literary output, and place it in the hands of logistics companies and information utilities, who would impose a tariff on every idea, hope or vision we express. Make beautiful books. Make them at any cost. Sell them as objects of beauty. Make the experience of reading beautiful and profound. Your books are bomb shelters for the ideas they contain, impervious to licence restrictions, OS upgrades, system crashes and planned obsolescence. You are the new Irish monks, poised to save Western civilization. Congratulations.

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~ David Michaelides is the former proprietor of the Toronto bookshop Swipe. This is an edited version of a talk he delivered at the Toronto ceremony honouring winners of the Alcuin Society Awards for Excellence in Book Design in Canada on October 4, 2010.