

*A niche future*

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—Mike O'Connor, Insomniac Press

GIVE WRITERS A CHANCE TO ask their editors and publishers questions, or give publishers a chance to talk about what's on their minds, and the shop talk is less likely to be literary than livelihoods.

So when organizers of Magazines Canada's annual conference assembled a panel to talk about trends in Canada's book publishing industry last summer, the issue that kept cropping up was survival in a digital age. The role of social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter—perhaps the last spaces where you would think to find book buyers—and the prospect of e-books and new ways of distributing content were uppermost on people's minds. And not necessarily in a bad way.

Michael Carroll, editorial director at the Dundurn Group in Toronto, said social networking has made it easier to target sales efforts and tap potential buyers. While traditional means of publicity such as book reviews in newspapers and magazines are less valuable means of publicity, a book launch earlier this year that was advertised solely on Facebook garnered 300 sales.

It's the kind of immediate response that's gratifying for smaller publishers, said Alana Wilcox, senior editor at Coach House Books in Toronto. She notes that so-called special sales—those placed directly with the publisher rather than through the traditional retail channels—were accounting for about half of Coach House's fall orders. A decade ago they might have accounted for just 10 percent. While special orders increase a publisher's workload, Wilcox says the orders also strengthen the publisher's relationship with its audience—something that makes long-term business sense. As other businesses have found out, the investment in developing authentic connections with consumers is really time spent marketing.

Mike O'Connor, publisher at Insomniac Press in Toronto, said it's the success and

failures of those other businesses that will actually help the book industry navigate the current waters of change more easily.

Though he's as preoccupied as anyone with the changes sweeping the industry these days, O'Connor believes the book industry is in a particularly advantageous position because it is one of the last industries to experience the full weight of the changes.

"Book publishing is coming late to the party, and that's a good thing because we see all the mistakes," he said.

When it comes to different formats for transmitting the content books offer, O'Connor wasn't sentimental. He expects the next five years to bring significant changes in the industry, as publishers continue to shift cheaper, more ephemeral works into electronic formats while traditional formats are refined for readers who prefer what will become a niche product.

He pointed to what's already happened with reference works, for which people—including the buyers at many big institutions—are no longer willing to pay (especially if they can get the information online).

O'Connor suggested that e-book readers will be ideal for textbooks, while books with a "self-contained discrete narrative" will persist in their own right.

The latter will challenge publishers to cultivate the special audience segments that will pay for hard copies of books, however.

Canada's publishers are used to being marginalized and playing to the niches in the market, so the coming changes should play to their strengths, O'Connor feels, an attitude that echoes what Tim Inkster of Porcupine's Quill told Alcuin Society members during his visit to Vancouver in April 2008. The one thing O'Connor hopes technology will do is improve the ability of publishers to do what they do best, because everyone is playing to the niches now.

"Technology is hopefully going to level the playing field," he said.

~ Peter Mitham is editor of *Amphora*. He attended Magazines Canada's annual conference in Toronto in June 2009, speaking on the business of writing.