

# Can't We All Be Writers?

*by* Brett Garcia Rose

Since the invention of the printing press writing and literature has remained relatively unmolested by technological change. We read pretty much the same way we've always read. While I routinely walk around with 12,000 songs in my mp3 player and my camera holds thousands of photos in a quality unobtainable on printed stock, I can still only carry three books in my bag. In the 5000 plus years or recorded history of writing, our biggest advancement has been switching from slabs of stone to slices of wood.

Books are habit-forming, expensive, and until recently, very profitable. You go to the store and spend \$29.99 on a book that cost pennies to manufacture and steadily degrades our natural resources. The writers like this. So do the publishing companies that select and promote them. The rest of us don't care until some new company comes along and tries to change it. Then all of a sudden we become suspicious. Yet we never stopped to wonder why it took readers so long to get their literary equivalent of the iPod when a digitized version of War and Peace takes up less space than a single song. Are we that addicted to books?

The Kindle and similar devices represent the first wave of change toward a consumer-driven literary market. The reader's backlash was expected and predictable; we like curling up with a good book, the feel of the paper, the variety of type and stock and smells. Every morning we cherish our horribly printed and lumped-together newspapers with their bland print, politically selected content, and our resultant dirty fingers and made-up minds.

But these arguments are short lived. As a reader, the medium obscures the content; different fonts, size, leading, paper, print quality and such more often than not detract from the experience of reading. Books are heavy and cumbersome and inefficient. And as a writer, it's an elitist argument purposely aligned with the technological and social proclivities of the writers themselves, who,

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Available online at *«<http://fictionaut.com/stories/brett-garcia-rose/cant-we-all-be-writers>»*

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admittedly, are far removed from the readers they serve. We love our books because they are physical and enduring and special, just like the writer wants to be. It's endearing when you find out your favorite writer still uses a fountain pen to create the works you love so much, and that nostalgia is transferred to your own love of books, however misguided. But is it accurate? Would you feel the same way if you found out your tax attorney used an abacus to defend you? If your pilot disdained navigational aids? If your laundromat was against detergent?

Additionally, there is the argument of dilution. Writers are special because the established selection process makes them so. Many writers, published or not, are brilliantly talented. Many more aren't, and much of it is a matter of timing and economics. Famous writers from the 19th century would likely have a difficult time finding a readership today, much less the rare opportunity to create one. Are writers so special that we are excluded from the economies of change? Are all of us not, in fact, writers, with our term papers and love letters and business emails? The issue is that self-proclaimed writers ply their trade for the love of it, and it is expensive to publish and promote a book, and if only a few thousand copies are sold it just isn't worth it. Publishing is a finely-tuned business that exploits the writer and the reader simultaneously, sailing just below our radar on a wave of nostalgia right to the bank, and they pay their accountants far more than their writers.

The truth is that writers are desperate to publish. We sit alone in isolation for days or months or years creating the masterpieces you breeze through on a lazy weekend. We need you far more than you need us, and when the publishing industry fails to supply new readers, we'll recycle them from our own stock. Every day new literary magazines crop up, some agonizingly beautiful in their presentation and delivery, yet when you compare the masthead of one with the table of contents of another, you'll see a disturbing trend. We create our own venues to publish and honor each other's work. This in turn keeps us writing. It's not-for-profit corruption. The currency is attention, and we're both the dealer and the addict.

If every individual had the ability to create feature films, and each movie theater had individual screens on the back of every seat and a selection of several million titles to choose from, would the film industry survive? If your television showed millions of channels streaming homemade news and reality programs from other households would you bother to watch? You would. One of our biggest fears is boredom, and entire economies are built on this singular fear. Technological advancement initially stratifies us and embellishes our lives and then, ultimately, dilutes our experience and herds us all toward irrelevancy.

It would seem that literature would have been the easiest, and therefore the first, to benefit from technological rejuvenation. Writers and readers all feed from the same finite collection of readily digitized words. There are no other variables to consider that would significantly alter the original product. Cinema, music, art, all have endless complications and complexities that affect their delivery and artistic integrity and preservation. To be a writer, and to enjoy the results as a reader, you need only a rudimentary understanding of a given language. Words and...paper? Not necessarily. The entire recorded history of literature can be compressed, stored on hard drives, and put in the trunk of your car without losing any of its original value to the reader. Unless you're a handwriting fanatic, in which case you belong in the art category anyway.

These little plastic and glass devices will change the way we read, certainly, but the real transformation will be the impact they have on *what* we read. If my neighbor Bob writes a book and directs me to his Amazon.com home page to download it, will I read it? Yes. If he hands me a stack of printed pages? No. It's classic NLP framing. The next step in the survival of the publishers will be to appeal to the vanity of writers themselves. All they care about is owning my reading time, and the only way for them to stay relevant is to follow the trend, slow it down and steer it to their advantage. Amazon.com will have an upload button to publish your Great American Novel for \$9.99 and allow you to market it to your Kindle friends. Itunes will

convert your manuscript to a template of your choice and offer it up to your Ipad pals. We already see this in the literary press. Sites like Fictionaut and Zoetrope do it all the time for free, where anyone can upload their stories or poems, and they expand virally every day. There are hypertext novels being written by the public themselves, where random users write the next thread based on previous narratives. What we see throughout this rapid evolution is that the editors and the publishers are being distilled, their tasks and very purpose being continually narrowed and refined.

As a writer, I lurk in the crux where it may no longer make sense to submit my work to prestigious journals. Not because I won't get published - indeed, the explosive growth of literary journals guarantees a publisher for *all* of my work, however experimental or unfinished - but because that very argument works against them. Would I go through the effort to become published in a journal with only a hundred readers? Why not just self-publish on Fictionaut and be read by thousands of my peers? Why not release my cherished work directly to my thousands of Facebook or Twitter or blog friends? I already direct my audience to these obscure journals, and, yet, are they merely middlemen? Should I cut them out entirely? Should I just create and market my books myself? Can the budding writer that I am realistically expect a larger starting audience? And if they don't know me and don't pay me, do I even care?

Nowhere is this phenomenon more evident than in online newspapers. There is less and less selectivity by editors because the real estate costs nothing. Every story is another opportunity for no-cost advertising. So editors become little more than glorified plumbers. Keep the news flowing. Keep everything useable and readable. Make sure the links work so they can get to the next advertisement smoothly and uneventfully. Cost dictates size. And if the cost doesn't change, why limit yourself at all? Why not publish every scrap you have? How many articles and stories and poems can a Kindle hold? How much can each person read? Why not create a single entity and publish *everything* where everyone is famous?

Because the truth is, your readers don't matter. You don't own them, they were always just guests. They were never yours.

They don't matter because of the simple, innocuous 'share button' following your stories and poems and videos and articles and, soon, 'books'. I see a story posted on Fictionaut by a 15-year-old high school student who just feels like writing. She's a writer like everyone is a writer. I see her story show up in the feed and I'm floored by her raw talent. I share it on my Facebook page or blog. A thousand of my contacts share it on theirs. The following week, a million people are reading her story. All without editors or advertisers. Suddenly I'm a publisher. All I need is a logo and an accountant.

We see the same with Youtube. Music sharing. Blogging. The eBook revolution will align itself with this phenomenon and the socialization and sharing of literature will commence. I read a fantastic book. Would I like to share the first few chapters with others who may like it? Of course. We already do this, via Twitter, Facebook, MySpace, Blogging, and before that traditional book groups. I recommend a particular work. The target of my recommendation goes to Barnes and Noble, buys the book. The store pays a toll to the publisher, who pays a toll to the writer, who buys more books. The final missing component is personal advertising. Would I publish my novel on Kindle with a few advertising pages tastefully inserted throughout the narrative? Would I make sure the hero drinks Pepsi, drives an Audi, wears an Omega watch and only uses Apple computers? Would you? Probably. And more books would be made available, and the world would be all the richer for it.

Can Amazon become our first mega publisher, the Starbucks of literature? Yes, and they may become our only one.

I'm saddened and embarrassed by the blogging phenomenon, just as I was with reality television and soap operas before that, but underneath it all, I'm excited for the technologies and the forced upheavals and collapses they represent. There is always an initial exploitation of new technologies by groups or individuals, and there is always the resultant recessive wave, like water seeking its own

level. Do I care if the publishers fail? No. Emphatically not. Writers will always write and share their art, regardless of who profits. If we wanted money or security, we'd be brokers or civil servants or waiters or drivers, and most of us are, anyway.

The e-Readers represent the first breakdown in publishing of the gatekeeper mentality. It was never about the cost of printing and distributing individual books. That's just the shelf fee, and you see the same in virtually every other industry. If there were no barriers to entry there would be no industry. No, it was always about the books themselves, the false rarity enforced by the natural limitations books represent. Garner the most readers using the fewest books. There is only so much space, only so much paper, only so many bookstores and only so much time to read. You can't just sell one of everything. So we trusted the editors and publishers to select and print what's best for us. They know what we'll buy, they know how to make money from it, and they know how to keep the industry afloat and ensure a steady supply of palatable writers. They edit and polish the work for us and the writer together, and deliver it in an attractive package we can afford. They care about us, and don't want to surrender the opportunity to meet our fragile, changing needs to the uncaring technocrats or, worse, to our own inept selectivity.

Will the Kindle or iPad change all that? Yes. But they will not edit prose. They will not correct grammar or enliven dull stories. Literature will not type itself. Technology does not corrupt art; business and money do. Technological change at best temporarily interrupts the corruption itself, offering a rare opportunity to reset the dynamic.

All that changes is the delivery method. But that changes everything else. Because, as history so eloquently and repeatedly teaches us, there is no way to contain art. Will everyone become a writer? Yes. We already are. Technologies like the Kindle and iPad and the internet itself align freedom of speech with economy of speech. Your drab bank teller will become the famous sex blogger she always knew was within. Your 15 year old niece will pen a

thrilling spy novel in her spare time shared with teens around the world. Your dull, paranoid father-in-law will establish himself as a respected news commentator in the narrowing circles he wades in. Your mother-in-law will write goth and horror. These new writers will ply to smaller audiences who in turn will reward them with closer attention and greater intimacy, the very things writers so desperately crave. The world shrinks and expands at the same time. This is the founding drive of art itself, and of the societal impact it strives to achieve.

You'll only ever read a minute fraction of what's written, and this is no less true today than it was a hundred years ago. And if two readers never read the same author, is that bad? Publishers say yes, of course, it's dreadful. You decide.

What is most surprising is that there ever was a writing business to begin with. As a writer, my passion is to communicate passion. To breach understanding. To share. I'll do this through essays or novels, in public view or hidden in secrecy. A business can be built upon my back, and that business can collapse under its own weight. It is not my problem. I won't even notice. My business, my life, is to communicate. I'll do it through agents and publishing houses if they want me, through newspapers or indie magazines if they'll have me, through Facebook or blogging or even Twitter if need be. I don't really need much help to do that. And if it all falls apart, as it inevitably does, I'll go back to composing love letters and diatribes on toilet paper and matchbook covers and wet sandy beaches with sticks and sea shells. Because that's what writers do. And because I never needed a million readers. I only ever needed one.

