

Book culture without books?

The Book is Dead (Long Live the Book)

By Sherman Young

University of New South Wales Press, 192pp, \$29.95, 2007.

ISBN 978-0-86840-804-0

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It seems appropriate to be writing this in Tokyo where a recent bestseller list showed that five of the year's most successful novels, including the top three, were first written to be read on mobile phones before being republished in book form. One has already gone to film. Written in screen-size chunks and chapters that can be finished in the time it takes to go from one Tokyo metro station to the next, their success has provoked a predictable division of opinion: they're symptomatic of the death of real reading among the young or they're the very thing most likely to promote reading among those who might otherwise have little interest in books. 'The book is dead; long live the book' indeed.

Sherman Young is not in the least afraid of the irony of writing a book about the death of the book. And as his argument shows along its course, it's only an irony if you don't get the point: the point, in this case, being just where we are in the intersecting histories of publishing, communication and entertainment technologies and their markets. The book explains its own logic for existing as a book but also the limitations of appearing in this form (and as that rare thing, an Australian trade hardback). So there's a logic, too, in the book's closing invitation to join the author and his readers in continuing the debate on the accompanying website (www.thebookisdead.com).

Although many of its arguments are familiar from the genre in both its utopian and dystopian forms, Young's book is not another death-of-the-book book. And despite his enthusiasm for much of what digital media *can* do, neither is it another techno-liberation treatise. It argues against the book as object so as to make an even stronger case for the book as a 'machine for reading', an 'ideas machine'. It is unapologetic, but not nostalgic, about asserting a values discourse in favour of the cultural significance of what books do or should do or once did in sustaining 'the human conversation' through what Young calls 'book culture'.

The book's thesis can be put simply: in order to save the book, the book must be killed off. In other words, in order to save and reinvigorate the valuable things about writing and reading that books (some books) have traditionally sustained, the fixation with the book as physical object, with the bound codex of ink on paper, must be left behind. 'By killing the physical object of the book,

you breathe new life into the book itself' (102); 'the way to save the book is to kill the object, and replace it' (127).

In many ways this *is* a simple argument. What makes it more complex is the deep anchorage of the pre-conceptions it must overcome; and the need to steer a clear line between digital optimism and bookish pessimism, between click and clique. Young has a workable knowledge of both publishing and digital media and a serious enthusiasm for what both can do, a combination pretty rare in the death-of-the-book debate but probably much less so in the real world. And central to the argument is that we do away with the opposition between books and digital forms to begin with.

Young's starting point is the assertion that printed books no longer sit at the centre of our culture and that book reading seems to be in terminal decline. Yes, more books are being published, books are more readily available, and book sales are up. But compared to the range of other media, books are marginal to what shapes the culture. And in any case the majority of books being published 'are more "anti-book" than book' (more on that distinction later). 'Take away the ghost-written sports autobiographies, ignore the celebrity cookbooks and cynical movie tie-ins. Bin the self-help books and the cash register stocking fillers. What's left? Not a lot.' (6-7). Although absolute sums for book purchases look impressive, take out the educational market and the stocking fillers and the figures don't look half so flash. And even if they were, a large proportion of the books sold today 'are *not meant to be read*' (52). Publishers are no longer interested in moving ideas into the public realm, only moving objects into the marketplace (they happen to be printed book objects). The economics of the publishing and bookselling sectors today make this almost inevitable as long as the book object (its printing, binding, shipping and storage) remains the central focus of the industry.

If this sounds like the familiar decline-from-the-golden-age-of-book-culture narrative, what's original about Young's argument is that it resists reading the decline of the book as we know it as the end of civilisation as we know it (well, it might be the end of parts of civilisation as we know it, but it's more about transformation than general decline).

On the one hand, he's able to survey the wide range of digital technologies to draw lessons for the future of the book. There are things that the internet, blogs, wikis, and the rest are very good at doing—providing continuous updates, creating new forms of 'public writing' for new (kinds of) writers, offering instant and cumulative interactive texts. But there have also been plenty of digital dead ends, and there are things the new media doesn't do well at all.

On the other hand, there are things books do well. Young defines in order to defend just what it is about books or 'book culture' that is valuable. Thus while the book as an object is dead, 'its place in the cultural milieu is essential and

must be protected' (20). A blog is not a book—not better or worse, just a different kind of medium, allowing or demanding different kinds of writing and reading capacities.

If what makes the internet so powerful is speed, timeliness and the 'democratisation' of production, books are essentially about slowing down time and establishing authority. Writing books, whatever the genre, is hard work. It takes time and research. 'Ultimately, books are about time; about slowing things down and forcing readers to slow down with them.' (41)

The process of writing (or more to the point, of reading, thinking and writing) is the journey that must be made to reach the destination. Authority does not come from merely having an idea. Authority, in book culture, is bestowed on someone because they have authored something.

... Books are creative acts whose only constraints are imposed by the author. As such, they are a retreat to the slow; to the thoughtful and reflective in an otherwise frenetic world. (82)

And yes, for this process to keep happening we still need publishers. Editors turn raw ideas and rough texts into books, which turn writers into authors (104). Publishers provide a kind of validation different from the forms of validation opening up in the new media.

But none of this makes the physical printed book object a necessity (indeed, the qualities that editing can bring to books, Young suggests, are largely missing from contemporary book publishing). The limitations of the book object in the context of present markets and technologies can only impede the reinvigoration of 'book culture'. Although printed books will not disappear—Young offers a very clear-eyed account of the survival and 're-purposing' of older technologies alongside the transformative power of the new—the future for books is an e-future in publishing, archiving, distribution and bookselling.

Book history as a discipline is not Young's major strength, less so than media history. The claim that publishers are no longer interested in ideas only in moving objects is the kind of over-statement loose enough to be more than a bit true and more than a bit misleading at the same time. While exceptions are acknowledged, it scarcely stands up as good history, as a substantial account of structural changes in publishing, bookselling, or reading. Nor can it account for the new kinds of life book culture keeps finding. Young is uncertain about whether it was ever all that different, whether or not most books were always 'anti-books', whether or not the mythical golden age was mythical, and just when the big change in publishing culture and reading habits occurred, twenty, fifty, or perhaps a hundred years back. These are constitutively difficult questions—there's never a moment in the modern history of publishing when it wasn't primarily commercial—and the opposition between 'culture' and

'commerce' is probably the least helpful way of attempting to answer them. In a different kind of book, the more sweeping claims about publishing made here would probably risk collapsing the argument. But if we read the broad history as being less about galloping commercialism than the changing place of the printed book within a rapidly expanding range of alternative forms of entertainment, information-provision and intellectual enquiry, and if we're prepared to go with book's polemical, accessible, provocative style, then, for the sake of the larger argument, I'm happy to let the generalisations pass (and to promise myself to slow down with the book's arguments at another time).

Similarly it would be easy to challenge Young's definition of 'book culture', relying as it does on defining the majority of books published today (and perhaps always) as 'anti-books'. Real books are the ones that contribute to the conversations about how we live, to ideas, values, debate. Personally I'd want to make an argument about the way that the self-help, travel, cuisine, interior decoration and other lifestyle books share the contemporary function of the 'good books', the classy literary fiction, memoirs, biographies and histories, that we find them next to in the 'good book stores'. And if we look back to the early twentieth century we find book culture constituted as much by the ephemeral bestsellers as by the literary classics. But perhaps that's part of Young's point: this broad, heterogeneous, public book culture—not just the minority culture of classics and moderns—is what's disappeared. Again the concept is workable for the purposes of the argument. Young needs it in order to separate 'book culture' (the ideas) from 'print culture' (the objects), but he's happy to leave the borders of the former term vague and open to question. It's not particularly about defending Literature or traditional high culture forms.

Young acknowledges that e books and other screen based reading platforms haven't yet succeeded in reproducing the printed book's readability but argues, by analogy with other areas (music recording, telephony, photography), that this is no reason for concluding that the technical problems won't be solved. 'Technological changes take *longer than we expect*, but with an impact that can be *greater than imagined*' (140). Just as the introduction of the iPod and iTunes was the tipping point for music, a similar tipping point for the printed book can be imagined. So too for the 'heavenly library': all books always available, on screen or through some version of print on demand (Young sees the kind of POD future as envisioned by Jacob Epstein and others as only one small part of the larger revolution of the book).

The hurdles might ultimately be cultural rather than technical: our attachment to the physical book, and our sense that books are cheap, portable, readily accessible and permanent. Young challenges each of these preconceptions — a paperback is cheaper than a laptop, but add up the costs of those books on your shelves... And think about just how far we have already gone down the digital

pathway. Most printed books are now just one *ephemeral* manifestation of a digital file, and the digital is where its permanence resides. An enormous amount of scholarly communication is now digital—like *AHR*—even if our institutions sometimes struggle with the fact. Wikipedia, as Young points out, has not proven to be the recipe for chaos predicted but an extraordinarily comprehensive, reasonably reliable, frequently corrected resource, one that stands the comparison with authoritative print equivalents.

Printed books will continue and not merely as antiquarian collectibles in so far as they still have utility, readability, marketability and authority. New media forms for the most part don't replace existing forms (think of radio) but they do shuffle their place and purpose in the cultural field. Indeed *The Book is Dead* shows the capacity for the printed book itself to be renewed. It is released under UNSW Press's new 'New South' imprint as a shortish, stylish hardback, on good stock, and with a cool, minimalist design, its essay-ish form—it has more 'maybes' than you'd get away with in a PhD—itself I think influenced by new media modes. It shows what smart publishers can do while still behaving like traditional publishers (though I do object to the use of the American 'math'; we do 'maths'!). While I'm probably more sceptical than Young about the potential for the new technologies to produce dramatic changes in reading and writing practices, or rather to produce an expanded, democratised and reinvigorated book culture rather than just more of the same, I suspect he's more right than wrong about the future of the printed book.

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