



August 10, 2012

# Dead Again

By LEAH PRICE

Two decades ago, the Book Review ran an essay, “[The End of Books](#),” in which the novelist Robert Coover questioned whether print could survive the age of “video transmissions, cellular phones, fax machines, computer networks, and in particular out in the humming digitalized precincts of avant-garde computer hackers, cyberpunks and hyperspace freaks.” Was the book as “dead as God”?

Coover’s answer was noncommittal, but his metaphor launched a thousand eulogies for the book as we knew it: a gathering of printed pages mass-produced on spec to be sold to anonymous strangers for financial gain. Back then, hyperlinks were the killer app. Coover’s title punned on the page-turning powers of the codex, which sweeps novel readers inexorably from Page 1 to The End. (He ignored how many codices, like the Yellow Pages, are designed for random access; millennia before the advent of Bible.com, the codex allowed the first Christians to cross-reference their Scriptures.)

Now, succession planners have shifted their sights from the lowly hyperlink to the seemingly indomitable e-reader. Earlier this year, the Pew Research Center calculated that the percentage of Americans who own e-reading devices doubled last December. Christmas, for centuries the publishing industry’s busiest season, became a gift to hardware manufacturers. And last year, Amazon announced it was selling more e-books than print books — hardcover and paperback combined.

There’s just one catch: chronology. Well before any of these digital technologies, Théophile Gautier’s novel “Mademoiselle de Maupin” had already declared that “the newspaper is killing the book, as the book killed architecture.” This was in 1835. And Gautier was only one-upping Victor Hugo’s “Hunchback of Notre-Dame,” which, four years earlier, depicted an archdeacon worrying the book would kill the cathedral, and a bookseller complaining that newfangled printing presses were throwing the scribes out of work. (The novel is set a quarter-century after Gutenberg’s first Bible, when a thriving industry of manuscript-on-demand was forced to readjust.)

In hindsight, we can see how rarely one technology supersedes another. Television didn’t kill radio any more than radio ended reading. Yet by 1927 a librarian could observe that

“pessimistic defenders of the book . . . are wont to contrast the active process of reading with the lazy and passive contemplation of the screen or listening to wireless, and to prophesy the death of the book.” By 1966, in a Life magazine profile, Marshall McLuhan lumped books with other antiques: “clotheslines, seams in stockings, books and jobs — all are obsolete.”

Every generation rewrites the book’s epitaph; all that changes is the whodunit. Gautier’s culprit was a very real historical phenomenon. Thanks to broader literacy, daily papers began to emerge in 1835, following the invention of the metal press around 1800 and the introduction of steam printing shortly thereafter. Science fiction writers would soon finger other, seemingly more fantastical villains: “fonografic” recordings, “telephonic sermons,” VCR-like “Babble Machines,” microfilm-esque “reading-machine bobbins” and “spools which projected books.” One 19th-century inventor gave the names of “whispering-machine” and “metal automatic book” to something that sounds like a cross between the audiobook and the Walkman. Users “would place the machine in the hat, and have the sounds conveyed to the ear by wires.” Besides curing eyestrain, these “reading machines” would “permit of the pursuit simultaneously of physical and of mental improvement.” Instead of hunching over desks, intellectuals would be free to jog and with both hands free, their wives could read while washing the dishes: “the problem of the higher education of woman would be triumphantly solved.”

The future, in all such cases, was recognizable by its bookshelf-bare walls. When the time traveler in H. G. Wells’s 1899 “When the Sleeper Wakes” alights in the 22nd century, he searches for hardcovers only to find rows of “peculiar double cylinders.” Insert one into a square apparatus, and presto: the rolls project “a little picture, very vividly colored, and in this picture were figures that moved. Not only did they move, but they were conversing in clear small voices. It was exactly like reality viewed through an inverted opera glass and heard through a long tube.” Where Wells invoked the optical devices used to magnify live theater, Aldous Huxley was inspired by the talkies three decades later to dream up “feelies” — “super-singing, synthetic-talking,” full-color stereoscopic extravaganzas “with synchronized scent-organ accompaniment.” Would these new technologies transmit text in more user-friendly forms or crowd out writing and reading altogether? On the eve of World War I, one collection of “Library Jokes and Jottings” favored the first hypothesis, imagining a day in the life of a late-20th-century household as follows:

“There was a knock at the front door, and the young people slid up the moving stairway, anticipating the parcel of books delivered each morning by the public library aeroplane service. They returned disconsolate; it was only the sterilized milk. ‘You youngsters don’t know what hardships are,’ said the elderly uncle; ‘when I was a lad, back in 1913, I used to get up at 9 o’clock in the morning and walk the length of the street to get a book from a Carnegie Library.’ ”

A century and a half earlier, the French visionary Louis-Sébastien Mercier had predicted that in

the year 2440, the sprawling bookstacks of the Royal Library would be condensed into a single volume. Like a chemist distilling botanical essences, Mercier explained, editors of the future would “extract the substance of thousands of volumes, which they have included in a small duodecimo” — scaled somewhere between an iPod and an iPad.

History proved Mercier right: the future lay not in expanding information, but in compacting it. By 1961, the Polish fantasist Stanislaw Lem pictured bookshelves squeezed onto what we would now call an e-reader. (“All my purchases fitted into one pocket, though there must have been almost 300 titles.”) And four years later, Frank Herbert’s doorstep-size “Dune” conjured a “Bible made for space travelers. Not a filmbook, but actually printed on filament paper.” Like thumb drives and Palm Pilots, the book is measured against a human body: thanks to a “magnifier and electrostatic charge system,” the volume takes up less space than the joint of a finger.

A darker strain of futurology emphasized political decline over technological progress. “Fahrenheit 451” represents book burning as an end in itself, not just the means to suppressing sedition. And “1984” opens with the purchase of a “thick, quarto-sized blank book with a red back and a marbled cover” — “a compromising possession.” A year before Orwell’s dystopia, the pulp magazine “Planet Stories” ran Bradbury’s second most famous book-burning fable, “Pillar of Fire.” Washed up in the 24th century, its time traveler heads straight for the library. Even in a society that torches horror fiction, circulation desks still exist, and their attendants still say, “May I help you?”

“ ‘I’d like to “have” Edgar Allan Poe.’ His verb was carefully chosen. He didn’t say ‘read.’ He was too afraid that books were passé, that printing itself was a lost art. Maybe all ‘books’ today were in the form of fully delineated three-dimensional motion pictures.”

However the terms change, in these visions, the place where books are read, acquired or received remains constant. Even that most cinematic of novels, “A Clockwork Orange,” begins and ends in the Public Biblio. Writers foresaw space travel, time travel, virtual reality and, endlessly, the book’s demise; what they never seem to have imagined was that the libraries housing those dying volumes might themselves disappear. After a year in which 2,600 public library branches cut back their hours, some readers will need to walk a lot farther than the length of a street. I’m still waiting for the public library aeroplane.

*Leah Price is a professor of English at Harvard and the author of “How to Do Things With Books in Victorian Britain.”*

