

Remember the Reader

By Jessa Crispin
Wednesday, July 2, 2008; 12:00 AM

Amid all the intellectual banter about the decline of the publishing industry, everyone seems to have forgotten about the reader. The National Endowment for the Arts releases [regular reports](#) saying how endangered we are, complete with pie charts and surveys to back up its claims. But me, I was born a reader. I grew up in a rural town of 1,200 people, and the closest bookstore was a chain bookstore 45 minutes away. After outgrowing Christopher Pike books (barely -- I still have dozens crammed into my bookshelf), I began supplementing my book collection with random authors I selected out of the [AK Press](#) catalog. It was quite the leap from Penguin Classics to Kathy Acker, but it felt like freedom.

Now, of course, with Amazon, Abebooks and Powells, no rural teenager has to beg her parents for a ride into town to stare at the same books that have been for sale for the past 15 years. Every single book that has ever existed is a point, a click and a parents' credit card number away.

That, of course, is part of the problem. On Sunday in Outlook, Jonathan Karp [lamented](#) the rise of the "disposable book," by which he means books that are not intended or expected to last. But the problem isn't that there are no substantial books being written. It's that they cannot be found in the usual places, or in the usual ways. Publishers are more concerned with profit margins than fulfilling readers -- and literary critics are falling into the same hole.

The [National Book Critics Circle](#) long argued that the problem was the dying newspaper book section. But most of the reviews are dead weight anyway, creating nationwide echo effect: "That Junot Diaz book sure is good, don't you think so?" "Oh yes, certainly." "And I absolutely think the world needs more superhero-derivative adolescent-boy sagas, alongside the occasional magical realism written by white male Ivy League graduates, don't you?" "Oh yes, yes. Quite right."

For the last six years, I've run a literary webzine called [Bookslut.com](#). It started off as an exercise in self-interest; I wanted to read reviews and interviews about the authors I was reading, and I had a hard time finding anything. Bookslut quickly gained a momentum I never expected. I certainly hoped as time went on that publishers and writers would come to see the Internet as a way to connect with their audience -- not just subscribers to the New York Times Book Review, but the 16-year-old kids in Kansas who just finished the entire series of "Sandman" and are desperately looking for something new to become addicted to.

Instead, publishers seem to be taking the music industry's lead on how to respond to this whole online thing, which goes something like this: "LA LA LA, I CAN'T HEAR YOU." And no, mailing every book you produce to a long list of bloggers does not count as embracing new media. Look what happened, for example, when Anne Enright [won the Man-Booker Prize](#). When a heretofore-obscure writer was suddenly appearing in every major British and American newspaper, readers started Googling her name -- only to find a [Wikipedia entry](#). There was no author Web site and no information about her backlist on her publisher's Web site. (And have you seen [her publisher's Web site](#)? Horrors.) Publishers complain about the lack of interest in literary fiction, and yet when it exists, they fail miserably at nurturing it.

Not that there are no publishers doing innovative work. Penguin UK melded short stories with gaming and Twitter for its "[We Tell Stories](#)" experiment. Its [Hamish Hamilton](#) imprint also just launched an online literary magazine, with a few kinks to be worked out. But what other publishers don't seem to understand is that the beauty of the online world is that it's cheap. You can throw things online, see if they work, and if not, try something else. Penguin UK has it exactly right: The Internet is just another place to tell stories.

Publishers seem willing to let Amazon, Wikipedia, and bloggers do their work for them -- to spread the word about what's worth reading. So my question to Jonathan Karp is this. If publishers are willing to wait until the collapse of the industry to return to publishing works of quality again, who suffers but the reader?

The writer is founder and editor of <http://www.bookslut.com/>.

Post a Comment

Comments that include profanity or personal attacks or other inappropriate comments or material will be removed from the site. Additionally, entries that are unsigned or contain "signatures" by someone other than the actual author will be removed. Finally, we will take steps to block users who violate any of our posting standards, terms of use or privacy policies or any other policies governing this site. Please review the [full rules](#) governing commentaries and discussions. You are fully responsible for the content that you post.

© 2008 Washingtonpost.Newsweek Interactive