

Reading into the future

excerpts from an address to teacher librarians

by Paul Collins



Science fiction and fantasy author Paul Collins is the founder and publisher of Ford Street Publishing and Creative Net speakers' agency. His books for younger readers include The Jelindel Chronicles and The Quentaris Chronicles series. His latest science fiction novels are The Earthborn, The Skyborn and The Hiveborn in The Earthborn Wars series.

This article highlights excerpts from Paul's address at recent professional learning days for teacher-librarians in NSW and Victoria.

Reading into the future? I am immediately reminded of a time when I employed palm readers – not the palm readers digital natives refer to today. See how words stay the same but meanings change?

I was working in a retail outlet that sold all things New Age, among which were crystal balls. One day a customer came into the store and asked to look a particular crystal ball from the window. I showed it to her, and she looked at it from every possible angle, handling it with some reverence. Finally, she looked me in the eye and said, "Does it work?"

I think there was an awkward pause on my part... Anyway, in this article, I am reading into the future... minus a crystal ball!

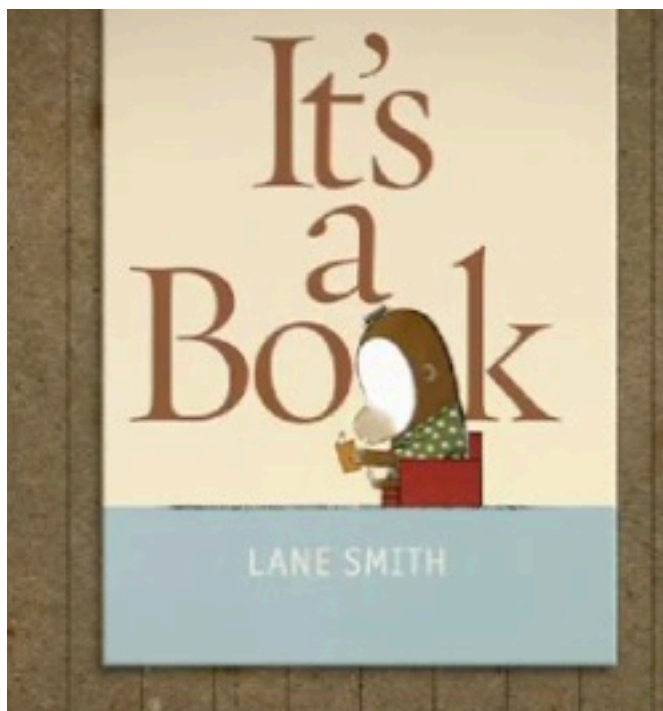
In the 21st century, the ability to read is necessary - not only to succeed but also to survive. The ability to understand information and the power of stories is the key to a life of purpose and meaning.

We could look at a zillion and one stats that prove the importance of reading. Just one recent study in the UK, from the National Literacy Trust Research (Clark & Douglas, 2011) states that, of 17 000 young people surveyed, reading frequency is strongly linked to attainment levels, with 60% of those who read every day achieving above the expected levels for their age, compared with just 5% of those who never read achieving above the expected levels. ►►

Below: Pauline Frederick - Potiphar's wife (between ca.1910 and ca.1915), George Grantham Bain Collection (Library of Congress). No known restrictions on publication, The Commons, Flickr. Accessed 14 February 2013. Persistent URL: hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/ggbain.12499



Reading into the future (cont.)



But how - and what - will our young people be reading into the future? Let's set the scene here with a brief book trailer. I'm sure many of you will have already seen this - but the point it makes is an interesting way to start our discussion.

Watch this *Youtube* video for an animated trailer, *It's a book* by Lane Smith (Macmillan Children's, 2010):

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x4BK_2VULCU

The above book: a backlash, perhaps, against the relentless onslaught of technology? Because this is where we're heading, whether we like it or not:

http://www.ted.com/talks/mike_matas.html

Mike Matas: a next-generation digital book (TED talks, 2011)

At the link, "software developer Mike Matas demos the first full-length interactive book for the iPad - with clever, swipeable video and graphics and some very cool data visualizations to play with. The book is *Our choice*, *Al Gore's sequel to An inconvenient truth*."

Science fiction writers – and I consider myself to be one of them – have a reputation for writing stories that predict the future. Sometimes they hit the mark, like George Orwell with *Nineteen eighty-four* (1949; "Big Brother is watching you") and at other times they're totally off, with their depictions of widespread use of flying cars and robot nannies. As an aside, SF writers completely missed people using personal computers for social networking and games.

Back in 1951, Isaac Asimov wrote a story called *The fun they had* for a children's magazine. Set in 2157, it was about a couple of kids who find an old book in their attic.

Here's an excerpt from it:

"They turned the pages, which were yellow and crinkly, and it was awfully funny to read words that stood still instead of moving the way they were supposed to – on a screen, you know.

"And then, when they turned back to the page before, it had the same words on it that it had had when they had read it the first time.

"'Gee,' said Tommy, 'What a waste. When you're through with the book, you just throw it away, I guess. Our television screen must have had a million books on it and it's good for plenty more. I wouldn't throw it away.'" (Asimov, 1951.)

The story goes on to what school will be like – personal teaching robots at home – but it's interesting that Asimov was correct in his prediction as to where books were heading – he was just out in his timing by about 150 years. I suspect he's right on the money with schools in the future, but the point we're looking at is his prediction we'll all be reading on some kind of screen – and that paper-based, print books will become redundant.

So the Age of eBooks has arrived and it looks very much like print books are on the way out, although the jury's out on this at the moment. Amazon recently announced that *Kindle* eBook sales have now surpassed all its hardcopy book sales combined, selling 105 digital copies for every 100 printed ones. Don Grover, chief executive of the Dymocks chain, says the physical book will be the dog and digital will be the tail. Personally, I think digital will take over. Who wants to be living back in the Dark Ages? We started out with sign language and grunting, graduated to stone tablets, moved on through scrolls, and the first books produced by printing presses.

Reading into the future (cont.)

It's been a similar story in the music industry. Singing around the campfire, or on a stage, was eventually recorded. Gramophone records fell to vinyl, which in turn lost sales to audiotapes; then along came CDs and iPods, which seem to be getting smaller and smaller by the minute.

eBooks aren't new – they've been around for almost two decades – downloaded to computers. Basic by today's standards, but they had audio and text and, to a minor degree, the illustrations were interactive. The experts say the kids either played the games or listened to the stories; there wasn't much actual *reading* going on.

Is *listening* to a story “reading”? I personally suspect not. I grew up in a house without books. Not one member of my family read. My brother and I read *comics*. Why read books when you have comics with pictures? If there had been eBooks with gaming features on them, I'd have been into them as well. I just know I would've preferred the visuals to the words. And this is a problem we're now faced with: some kids, who normally wouldn't have read a print book, will get into “reading” with all the gadgets that eBooks and apps will have – which is terrific. It might mean more boys – with their recognised love of computer games – will get into reading. But in the process, will we risk losing the generations who would have been readers of sustained narrative?

Publishers will be scrambling around trying to fend off the eBook as though it's the opposition, or death of the print book. I see eBooks as a *complement* to print books myself. Whatever the platform – eReader or print book – *content*, as I'll address next issue, will always be important.

Will print books disappear altogether?

So, will the kids of today, whom marketing gurus love to call “digital natives”, completely ditch plain, old, boring, print books (produced by people like me: a “digital immigrant”), in favour of new, whiz-bang, multi-media models? And what will happen to all these books? Maybe something like this:

<http://inhabitat.com/artist-brian-dettmer-carves-old-books-into-intricate-narrative-sculptures/brian-dettmer5/?extend=1>

(Artist Brian Dettmer carves old books into intricate narrative sculptures.)

Or this:

Alchemist/designer Ryan Jude Novelline's website at www.ryanjudenovelline.com/golden-book-gown/ shows a gown that has been made out of the recycled pages of *Little Golden Books*. Even the bodice is made from the books' iconic golden foil spines.

At this stage, no one really knows if print books will disappear altogether. There are all sorts of theories. Ten years ago, everyone thought that eBooks were going to be big. The primitive eReaders available at that time never really caught on; now that technology has caught up, things are changing and evolving quickly. Things changed from when I started and finished writing this speech! Already, eBooks are achieving a bigger and bigger share of publishers' sales.

Someone who does think he knows what will happen is Cory Doctorow, a Canadian science fiction author who writes for the Young Adult market. Cory and I share a publisher: Tor Books. You may know his well-regarded book about techno-geek rebellion, *Little brother* (Tor, 2007).

Cory has picked up a reputation as the writer who gives away simultaneously-published eBook versions of his hardcopy novels for free. A so-called “digital rights activist”, Cory believes that, by offering free downloads of his eBooks, he is creating an additional audience for his work, i.e. readers who would not have found his writings by other means. So far, Cory has had over 700 000 free downloads of his novel, *Down and out in the Magic Kingdom* (Tor, 2003). 30 000 of these came on the first day of release!

As a writer, I can only dream of that kind of exposure!

Cory is convinced that paper books will eventually disappear. However, at that point, he's pretty sure we won't be using digital eReaders that simulate the experience of carrying around “real books” like they do now, with pages that make fake turning sounds as you flip them over. He thinks that would be like people imagining that a mobile phone would be the same thing as the landline telephone attached to your wall, or sitting on your desk – except that it's in your pocket!

No, the future “book” will be something far more amazing than an eReader. Sadly, Cory can't tell us exactly what they will be like – except to say they will be “weird” – because they haven't been invented yet. Much as people born in the earlier half of the last century must now be viewing the devices in common use today as “weird”, i.e. those devices that the rest of us take for granted every day. Fortunately, there are already some other people beaver away producing the next generation of eReaders.

Here is a sample of some of them:

- A “next gen” eReader called *The Page* that is as thin as a sheet of paper, folds up, and has an eInk screen that can display text and images.
- A bendable touchscreen display that is shatterproof and crack-proof. ▶▶

Reading into the future (cont.)



- A computer with a holographic screen that you can fold up and wear on your wrist. (*This will be on the market in 2020, we're assured!*)
- A solar-powered eReader.
- A *Braille* eReader for the visually impaired.

It is the “how” that is changing

Television didn't kill radio. Video didn't kill cinema. eBooks won't kill books. However we end up doing it, reading is part of our lives. We need it for both information and entertainment purposes... and, well, for survival.

You still need to be able to *read* to engage in social networks such as *Facebook* and *Twitter*, to interpret the onscreen instructions and/or cheat sheets for *Angry birds*, or to find that emergency number for the *Poisons Information Line*, whether it's by thumbing through the chunky hardcopy of the *White pages* or Googling for it online.

Reading is not going away any time soon. It's just *how* we do it that is changing. ●

Great ideas for keeping the momentum going at your school

See the extensive list of innovative K-12 literacy activities, as compiled by Jackie C Hawkes, at the **PMBW Teacher librarians'** blog:

<http://pmbw.edublogs.org/2012/01/30/2012-national-year-of-reading/>

Above: Mike Matas: a next-generation digital book (TED talks, 2011) http://www.ted.com/talks/mike_matas.html

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