

By the Book

Even in the Kindle age, the printed page still has its place.

By Jeremy Beer

NO INDUSTRY FRETTS about its future more than publishing. “How do you make a small fortune in publishing? Start out with a large fortune” runs one of the gallows-humor jokes told by publishers for the better part of a century now. The latest round of handwringing occasioned by the state of the economy, Kindle, Amazon’s aggressive advance, the teetering of Borders, the declining percentage of Americans who read—things any publisher worth his salt would be happy to discuss if you have a spare hour—is not exactly out of character.

Perhaps things are different this time. The digital age is certainly destroying the newspaper and magazine industries. (And who needs news and journalism when we can just comment on one another’s opinions all day?) But what about book publishing? Is the *Economist* right to speculate, as it did in February, that it “seems likely that, eventually, only books that have value as souvenirs, gifts or artefacts will remain bound in paper”?

In some genres, yes, the printed book can’t compete with electronic editions. This is already true for scientific and technological textbooks. Likewise reference works and travel guides—anything in which the purpose is to convey precise, timely information and the pleasure of reading is at best a tertiary consideration. For many other genres, however, the immediate ascension of e-books over their printed brethren seems highly doubtful. Kindle users don’t buy fewer printed books. They simply add e-books. And the easy

availability of recipes online hasn’t exactly made cookbooks disappear: quite the opposite.

The printed book is itself an amazingly efficient piece of technology. It is highly scannable, allowing the user to perceive, assimilate, and make connections among dozens of bits of information in very little time by flipping through pages, perusing the table of contents, or reading jacket blurbs. The nature of the book’s physical qualities is itself an important conveyor of information. Trim size, binding, font, cover design, and layout all say something to the reader. Who doesn’t prefer using a good index in a printed book to doing a search in a PDF document? It’s easier, faster, and better for making sense of the context of any particular entry.

Moreover, books are more than just information providers. They are aesthetically appealing. As tactile objects, as physical products of human art and ingenuity, they are attractive. Do you get the same sense of anticipatory pleasure when you imagine curling up at night, or on a rainy day, with your laptop as you do with a book? Perhaps you do. Maybe most people do. But many do not.

Of course, there are definite disadvantages to printed volumes. For consumers, these include portability, timeliness, speed of delivery, and, to a lesser extent, cost. For publishers, expense heads the list. Books are pricey to print, bind, and ship. Cut out these expenses, and the costs of editing, designing, and marketing books suddenly become much more absorbable.

So, more likely than the near extinction of printed books is the development of a situation in which e-books complement but do not replace them. The book industry could actually become larger and more profitable once a standard, consumer-friendly e-book delivery system becomes available. Contrary to all expectations, the publishing industry may soon be on the come.

But why do we even need publishers? That is the question posed, rhetorically and flatteringly, by the companies eager to help a budding author self-publish his masterpiece. Why settle for a measly 10 percent of the revenues when you can front the costs and then use the miraculous power of New Media to sell your fascinating tome? Not a bad idea, for some authors. Alas, many more have learned that this is a good way to sink \$10,000 into a decade’s worth of Christmas gifts for friends, family, and favorite waitresses.

Self-publishing has not become the panacea it promised to be because publishers serve functions far beyond the provision of capital and the dumping of manuscripts into design templates. They have marketing muscle. They employ sales representatives to pitch books to buyers at Ingram, Borders, Barnes & Noble, and major independents across the nation. They offer access to distribution channels, customer service, and bookkeeping. And they provide, or should provide, expert editing and production skills that will bring a messy manuscript into readable form.

Even more important than the services publishers provide to their authors is the essential screening function they offer consumers. If no publishers existed, we would have to invent them. It would simply be too time-consuming and inefficient to find, among the countless books put out by self-proclaimed authors, the few that actually have merit.

Nearly everyone looks askance at the role of cultural gatekeeper or credentialer these days, for good reasons and bad. But what Ken Myers, editor of the *Mars Hill Audio Journal*, calls the “loss of cultural authority” is something that conservatives should think hard about in this context. Even the digital entrepreneurial pioneer Andrew Keen, Myers writes, has come to see that “the survival of the very best forms of cultural expression ... requires a network of mediation and accreditation.” Publishers serve a crucial function as “cultural institutions.” Yes, such institutions “can be corrupted and standards can become debased.” Nevertheless, without them, the appearance of truly innovative, world-expanding, great works of art and thought becomes less likely—and the pervasiveness of schlock much more so. “Without some form of institutionalized judgment established over time in communities of expertise, without, that is, some knowledgeable person to tell you your work isn’t good enough to be published,” Myers writes, “cultural expression easily becomes mere self-expression.”

Thus, the screening function remains practically necessary and culturally important. In the future, people will be no more likely to waste time and money on products of low quality if there are better alternatives. Self-publishing is not likely to become as prestigious or as lucrative as publishing with a respected imprint.

Does that mean that, except for the

dwindling number of special-imprint internment camps created solely for their use, conservatives will remain locked out of a mainstream publishing world unalterably hostile to their ideas?

Are they really locked out now? Mainstream publishers’ biases against conservatives have been greatly exaggerated. Serious, right-leaning authors have always found homes. John Lukacs is published by Yale University Press and Basic Books. Andrew Bacevich writes for Holt and Harvard. Walter McDougall has published with HarperCollins, Houghton Mifflin, and Basic Books. Tom Wolfe. Pat Buchanan. David McCullough. Clearly, these authors have varying convictions and theoretical commitments. But what they have in common is more important: they are not partisan toadies, and they are all supremely talented.

There’s your bias. Untalented liberal hacks can get published by the mainstream imprints, but conservatives burdened with mundane abilities and superficial insights must look elsewhere or keep the manuscript in the drawer. All to the good. How ironic that our publishing houses have kept the gates of culture better for conservatives than for liberals. Let us applaud their defense of high standards.

Even so, it must be confessed that there is a depressing similarity of vision and background at the major presses. Editors are drawn from the same Seven Sisters schools and country club pools. And they’re virtually all in New York, which is fine if you’re as smugly provincial as a *New York Times* editor, but some of us think that it would be nice for other provincialisms to have a cultural voice. As a result, it is certainly true that talented writers with unapproved views often find it unnecessarily difficult to reach the audience and to achieve the influence that their work deserves.

What to do? Consider this historical counterfactual: What if, as their namesake movement was coalescing in the 1950s and ’60s, conservative elites had decided to invest in culture rather than politics—in New York instead of Washington? What if their programs, scholarships, fellowships, conferences, and summer institutes had been geared toward identifying talented students and writers, exposing them to conservative perspectives, preparing them for entry into the world of high culture—including the worlds of serious trade and academic publishing? This would not have been a hopeless tack. After all, most publishers and many other high-culture institutions aim to make money, and if a prospective employee can advance that aim, intellectual prejudices are not insuperable. Besides, those prejudices may not have been very strong had conservatism not been so politicized, thanks to the Washington strategy.

Some of these young writers would have doubtless made it big. They would now hold (or be retired from holding) high positions in the huge publishing conglomerates. A number would have formed their own houses and set up their own imprints. Perhaps some—let us dream—would have drifted back to Dallas and St. Louis and Boise and started publishing houses there. Others would have become agents, buyers, bookstore owners, distributors, editors, reviewers, essayists, publicists, and the like. The publishing landscape would be very different.

That same strategy could still be undertaken today in ways large and small. But it would require the kind of open-ended, risky investment in thought—what the old-time great-books types called “the adventure of ideas”—that only truly enlightened patrons are willing to undertake. I’m not sure that they’re out there, though that shouldn’t stop brave young men

and women of a literary bent from adopting such a strategy on an individual basis.

Otherwise, if they find the walls of the mainstream houses impenetrable, conservatives are left with nontraditional options. Self-publishing is unlikely to become more prestigious, but micropublishing is well suited to take advantage of the opportunities of the digital age. The capital barriers are low and getting lower. Perhaps we will see the advent of small, nonpartisan, conservative-leaning but open-minded for-profit presses. Even local centers, institutes, and think tanks could easily launch their own imprints. The time is ripe, too, for imaginative middlemen: distributors, consultants, marketers, agents—yes, thanks for asking: I work in these fields—who can help small-fry start swimming in the big publishing pond.

This could mean a more intelligent, interesting, and diverse landscape for conservative authors and ideas. Maybe a more golden age, even, than the one that flourished, according to Adam Bellow, in the halcyon George H.W. Bush days. Perhaps one like that interlude in the 1950s, when Richard Weaver and Friedrich Hayek could publish with the University of Chicago Press and Henry Regnery could publish genuine philosophers and courageous iconoclasts. Or even, perhaps, one like that truest of golden ages, before World War II when T.S. Eliot's arch-traditionalist books on culture and the Christian society could be published by Harcourt Brace, and when a volume such as *I'll Take My Stand* could be brought out by Harper & Brothers—that is, an age when the conservative and liberal might again lie down like the lamb and the lion beside the desk of the very same publisher.

Chaos, after all, means opportunity. ■

Jeremy Beer was principal editor at ISI Books from 2000 to 2008.

Guilt Trip

Eric Foner writes history to suit the politically correct Left—and the neocons.

By Paul Gottfried

ERIC FONER, DeWitt Clinton Professor of History at Columbia University, is the most professionally successful academic historian of our time. He has served as president of all three major historical organizations, published a widely acclaimed book on Reconstruction as “America’s unfinished revolution,” and appears frequently on national television. He and a likeminded historian, James McPherson, have been conspicuously urging President Obama to sustain affirmative action and consider reparation payments for the descendants of American slaves. Foner has put before the public what he considers the unfinished civil-rights agenda in his 2002 textbook *Give Me Liberty: An American History* and in other books written for a popular readership, such as *The Story of American Freedom* and *Forever Free: The Story of Emancipation and Reconstruction*. Rarely has an historian had such abundant opportunities to shape public consciousness on a critical social issue.

Foner’s vision of American history comports with the political correctness favored by the Left today—indeed at times he seems less interested in Reconstruction than in reconstructing latter-day American society. Surprisingly, or perhaps not, this project has won him influential admirers among the Republican Party. But even as Foner invokes the legacy of slavery and other racial iniquities as pretexts for government-mandated “social justice” and sensitivity

today, he has never had to say he was sorry that he and his family white-washed the crimes of Stalin’s USSR.

Foner has earned high praise from George W. Bush’s gray eminence, Karl Rove. A 2003 *New Yorker* profile by Nicholas Lemann noted that one of Rove’s favorite books was Foner’s study of the early Republican Party, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men*. According to Lemann, Rove read the book “less as a dispassionate analysis of the early Republicans’ strengths and weaknesses than as a guidebook on how to broaden the appeal of the Party.” Foner was delighted to learn of this: “Karl Rove is my man,” he told his class at Columbia, even as he continued to hold Rove’s employer in disregard. In 2006, Foner published a *Washington Post* op-ed saying of President Bush, “He’s the Worst Ever.” “I think there is no alternative but to rank him as the worst president in U.S. history,” Foner wrote, comparing him unfavorably even to the alleged “fervent white supremacist” Andrew Johnson.

Despite the professor’s Bush-bashing, Rove clearly respects Foner, and so it is perhaps not remarkable that certain phrases from Foner’s ideas about “the unfinished revolution” popped up in Republican campaign literature during the 2006 midterm elections. Party strategists evidently decided that linking the Union side in the Civil War with the later civil-rights agenda would provide a useful metaphor for the war to build democracy in Iraq. The plan only partly