

[*Digital Barbarism: A Writer's Manifesto*, Mark Helprin, Harper, 256 pages]

What's the Net Gain?

By Peter Suderman

AS A MUSIC ENTHUSIAST in high school, I spent as much money as I could scrounge on new records. So did most of my friends. Few of us, though, could afford all the albums we wanted. It was the 1990s: the Internet was still in its infancy, and most of the music we listened to was never played on the radio.

To satisfy our musical cravings, we formed an unofficial collective. We bought what we could and copied anything else from the rest of our group. We also befriended every touring band, copying their CD's when they stopped in town—CD's that the band members had copied from similar groups of kids in towns all over the country.

Our habits were certainly illegal, though by no means uncommon. We still spent the bulk of our incomes and significant amounts of time acquiring new music. Thanks to these informal networks, however, our collections—really a single, shared collection—grew faster than our after-school jobs' incomes would otherwise allow.

Compare that to today, when music fans can effortlessly obtain millions of songs across the virtual plane, each a perfect duplicate of the original. My high school friends and I together spent tens of thousands of dollars each year on new music; now it's possible to build a vast collection without spending a cent.

For novelist Mark Helprin, this is a black mark on the core of Western society, a deadly cancer that he believes is growing more swiftly than most media commentators admit. In *Digital Barbarism: A Writer's Manifesto*, he dedicates more than 200-odd pages to defending copyright and excoriating the file-sharers and their apologists.

Helprin focuses on his own industry, publishing, rather than music, yet functionally there is little difference. The Internet-enabled spread of copyright violations is, for him, an open assault on all that makes civilization free and great: property rights, individual authorship, human ingenuity and independence, artistic vigor and integrity.

He claims that *Digital Barbarism* is partially memoir, and it's true that he relies on personal anecdotes to make his case. First and foremost, however, this book is a polemic about the urgent need to protect intellectual property in the Internet age.

As the subtitle makes clear, Helprin's concerns are primarily those of a writer and creator, not a scholar or a lawyer. He makes his argument almost exclusively on cultural, historical, moral, and aesthetic grounds. Indeed, he is actively hostile to the legal establishment and the academy. He berates tenured professors, whom he regards as disrespectful parasites steeped in deconstructionist theory, preying on the greatness of authors.

Lawyers, meanwhile, with the proud assistance of law schools, apparently

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make "claims of superiority in regard to policy questions over which they have no more superior right or understanding than would a cucumber." Helprin even suggests snidely that he may be better suited to pronounce on copyright law because of his lack of legal training. "I apologize for not being a lawyer, except that it may allow me to comment sensibly upon the law," he writes. That's sarcasm, not to be taken at face value, but the sentiment is telling. Helprin can't be bothered with the intricacies and details of the law. What matters is the strength of his conviction and judgment, no matter how uninformed.

Helprin regards legal practitioners as abettors of the wider anti-copyright

movement, a monster driven forward by "a pack of intellectuals intoxicated with their own powers." These leaders, he explains, preside over a vulgar virtual mob—"raised on downloads and quarter-second video cuts"—who require "various professional interpreters to smooth over their followers' many mental crevasses and provide summaries of that which would take more than five minutes to read before eliciting a blizzard of bad grammar."

Where would Helprin's argument be without such lowly, "subliterate" creatures? On countless occasions, he quotes them in order to prove his point. Often, he goes so far as to attribute their words to the website on which they left their remarks. So, for example, an entry by "Peep," a commenter at Matthew Yglesias's *Atlantic* blog, is credited in the text to the *Atlantic Online*. To find out that Peep is not a staffer on the magazine—or anyone writing with *The Atlantic's* backing—one must flip to the endnotes. This is comparable to somebody objecting to an outspoken member of the audience at a lecture, then claiming that the attendee and the speaker are practically the same. Helprin's unwill-

ingness to distinguish between these two—those who write online for a living and the web-commenting masses—drastically undermines the effectiveness his point.

His repeated observations about the poverty of grammar on the Internet are not surprising—no one would argue that the commenters show much aptitude for punctuation. Yet this is another of Helprin's obsessions: bad aesthetics, particularly bad writing. Bloggers and blog-readers are "foul mouthed." They publish their views in the midst of a "Spenglerian decline." Aesthetic standards have been compromised by modernity, and civilization is failing as a result: "Much of the alienation and fail-

ure of the electronic age is due to the fact that its enthusiasts lack education in the humanities,” Helprin writes. The forces allied against strengthening copyright are therefore engaged in “assault upon the independent voice and the incentive to create.”

For Helprin, then, the battle over copyright is a battle over fundamental societal tenets. Copyright is an unalloyed force for good. He scorns what even copyright defenders regard as the prime benefit of loosening restrictions on digital copying: the wealth of access and information made available. “Choosing to be always connected,” he fumes, “to do a thousand things at once, to have ‘everything’ available instantly, to skip at great speed from subject to subject and person to person, is to model oneself after a machine, to take on its attributes and, by necessity, to leave behind many of the qualities of being human.”

Helprin does not relent in his gloominess toward our tech-savvy age. The list of things that he finds depressing is long and scattered: iPhones, BlackBerries, overly simple prose, overly complicated prose, gender-studies professors, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, blogs, popular music, Alec Baldwin, Martin Heidegger, the American Library Association, large groups of people. It is difficult for the reader to keep track.

This rampant hostility, much of it taking the form of careless tangents, is not merely unnecessary; it is off-putting. It blunts the force of Helprin’s argument. Combined with his oft stated disdain for scholars and lawyers, it serves to obscure the essential points in the debate.

Helprin can be a beautiful writer, and in his fiction he exhibits a devotion to humanity in the way that the best novelists do. But here he often comes off as a crank. This book is more rant than reason.

His excessive vitriol is especially disappointing because, underneath all the rage, Helprin has a point worth taking seriously. The Internet has engendered a fundamental change in the way intellectual property is stored and distributed—

and it is a shift away from the rights of the individual and toward those of the collective.

There has long been an undercurrent of copyright piracy in media consumption, but technology has now propelled this tendency into dominance. The soft socialism of my high school music collective is more darkly embedded in the very nature of the net, which everyday expands and accelerates its reach and capabilities.

It is one thing to make mix CD’s for—or even to share a library with—a handful of friends; it is quite another to enlarge that circle to the point that it encompasses most of the world. Our small band of gawky teenagers armed with CD burners, tiny allowances, and too much time would not have brought down an entire creative industry. But we might have, given the option to join an infinitely larger network through easy electronic swapping. That such a thing might happen, or would be a catastrophe if it did, is not a foregone conclusion. But it’s reasonable to be wary any time such power is introduced. The difference between the mass file-sharing of today and the casual trading of prior decades is still only one of degree, yet it is the degree whence the worry stems.

As it stands, the sharing power of the Internet serves both the individual and the collective: it is not yet clear which will emerge triumphant or what the costs will be. Helprin has chosen his side, and his position is not altogether unreasonable. Certainly, his arguments contain some truth. His prose often veers toward the lofty, but is most powerful when it is most simple: “You never need be ashamed to claim what is rightfully yours.” His anger is perhaps understandable, even admirable. Helprin is a writer. His books, his creations, provide him and his family with their living. Those words are what he has, and he is only trying to claim them for himself and his heirs. ■

Peter Suderman blogs at The American Scene.

[*A Terrible Splendor: Three Extraordinary Men, a World Poised for War and the Greatest Tennis Match Ever Played*, Marshall Jon Fisher, Crown, 336 pages]

Splendor on the Grass

By Jeffrey Hart

A GREAT TENNIS MATCH is in the foreground here, but this brilliant book is about much more than tennis. Played on Centre Court, Wimbledon on July 20, 1937, the Davis Cup contest between Germany and the United States took place a year after Hitler’s march into the demilitarized Rhineland and a year before Germany’s annexation of Austria in 1938, swiftly followed by the handover of Czechoslovakia to Germany at Munich.

That ominous sequence provides the famous Budge-von Cramm match with the “terrible splendor” of Marshall Jon Fisher’s title. As in all Davis Cup matches, the name of the countries replaced the names of the players, as in “Advantage, United States” or “Game, set, Germany.” It was as if the Second World War had begun early.

In 1937, Hitler was very much on our minds. We regularly heard his speeches broadcast from Berlin, with the BBC man translating as the Führer ranted away in the background: “Herr Hitler says that ...” There was a weird counterpoint between the calm tone of the British voice and that of Hitler, who repeatedly rose to hysterical outbursts as the crowd roared. We listened with increasing alarm.

In our New York City neighborhood, interest in the Don Budge-Baron von Cramm match was intense: America versus Germany. Many of our neighbors, especially the women, rooted for the glamorous blond German aristocrat. I was 7 at the time, and I listened on my small plastic radio to Al Laney, later a famous writer on tennis, broadcasting