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# Wake Reads Together: A Panel Discussion on the Future of the Book

by Frannie Ashburn

In 1998, the Seattle Public Library launched “If All of Seattle Read the Same Book.” This program was designed to get folks in Seattle all reading and talking about the same book at the same time, and it was so successful that it has been widely emulated around the country, including in many North Carolina communities. Wake County Public Libraries developed its community-wide reading program — Wake Reads Together — to encourage people to read and talk about a good book and to become more aware of their library system and the services it offers. This project became the most successful county-wide adult program ever offered by the library and Wake Reads Together is now in its second year. (For 2004 we’re reading Lewis Nordan’s *Wolf Whistle*, and the book had already been checked out of the library more than 1,000 times by the end of January.)

In October, 2002, in preparation for Wake Reads Together, county residents were polled and they voted to read *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury. This book was written the year that Elizabeth II was crowned Queen of England, the year that Eisenhower became president, and the year that Hemingway won the Pulitzer Prize for *The Old Man and the Sea*. Fifty years have passed and *Fahrenheit 451* has never been out of print.

Beginning in January 2003, there were hundreds of copies of *Fahrenheit 451* available in public libraries, and bookstores stocked up on copies as well. It is estimated that 10,000 Wake County residents read *Fahrenheit 451*. More than 2,200 patrons checked the book out of the libraries, and 1,800 copies of the book were sold in bookstores. Nearly 1,500 people attended events throughout the county at libraries, schools, cafes, coffee shops, senior citizen centers, bookstores, and museums. Numerous book clubs, Parent Teacher Associations, and teachers made *Fahrenheit 451* a reading selection for their group members or students. The library and its community partners sponsored 34 related events and programs during March and April.

As a finale to Wake Reads Together and to continue the community dialogue about the issues raised by Bradbury’s classic novel about book burning, the library organized a Community Forum to consider the following:

Is there a place for the printed word in the digital age?

Are books becoming obsolete?

Is reading still relevant?

This forum was held on April 9 [2003] in the department of Cultural Resources

building and was hosted by the State Library of North Carolina. The panel of experts that addressed the audience included a book critic, a librarian, a technophile, and a science fiction author. The panel moderator was Frannie Ashburn, Director of the North Carolina Center for the Book. After their presentations, the panel members answered questions and responded to comments from the audience. A final word was had by Tom Moore, Director of the Wake County Public Libraries, whose remarks included thanks to Wake Reads Together Project Managers Elena Owens (Reader's Services Supervisor) and Susan Brown (Librarian) and also to Dale Cousins (Regional Library Supervisor), all three from the Cameron Village Regional Library in Raleigh, and to the many staff members system-wide who worked so hard to make the project so successful.

We are grateful to the panelists who have allowed us to reprint their remarks.

First to speak was J. Peder Zane, book review editor and books columnist for the *Raleigh News & Observer*. His award-winning Sunday column received the 1999 Distinguished Writing Award for Commentary from the American Society of Newspaper Editors. Zane is a graduate of Wesleyan University and Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism.

Speaking from the librarian's point of view was Robert Burgin. Burgin is a native of Rutherford County, North Carolina, and received his undergraduate degree from Duke University and his masters and doctoral degrees from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He has worked in the library field for 27 years, as a public librarian, a professor at North Carolina Central University's School of Library and Information Sciences, a consultant, and (from 1999-2001) as the Assistant State Librarian for Information Technology at the State Library of North Carolina. Burgin is the author of more than 40 articles and is currently editing a book on advising non-fiction readers. (Note: Burgin says that if he were one of the "book people" in *Fahrenheit 451* he would memorize James Joyce's *Dubliners*.)

Speaking as a technophile was Paul Gilster, a professional writer who early on discovered the power and potential of the Internet. He has shared his insight, bringing the everyman's view of technology to users around the world. Gilster is the author of the bestselling *The Internet Navigator*, of *Finding It on the Internet*, and *Digital Literacy*. He is a technology columnist for the *Raleigh News & Observer*.

Representing writers was John Kessel, award-winning science fiction author and director of North Carolina State University's Creative Writing Program. Kessel is a native of Buffalo, New York, and earned his B.A. at the University of Rochester (English and Physics) and his masters and doctoral degrees in English at the University of Kansas. He has been at NCSU since 1982 and his honors include winning the Nebula and Theodore Sturgeon Memorial Awards. Kessel is the author of *Corrupting Dr. Nice*, *Meeting in Infinity*, *Good News from Outer Space*, and *The Pure Product*. *Booklist Review* has this to say about *The Pure Product*, "Science fiction remains largely dominated by ideas. Kessel's ideas astonish and compel in these pellucidly written, hammeringly effective stories."

## **J. Peder Zane**

Bean counters, numbers crunchers, the green eyeshade brigade — these devotees of the almighty dollar have seized control of the publishing industry during the last quarter-century, making the art of the bottom line the literary world's guiding aesthetic. Funny thing is, their reign has been marked by the kind of explosive growth in America's book culture that their tweedy forebears only could have imagined after their third martini at the Four Seasons. Go figure.

This surprising news is detailed in a new report, "Best and Worst of Times:

The Changing Business of Trade Books, 1975-2002," which journalist Gayle Feldman prepared as a fellow at Columbia University's National Arts Journalism Program. Among her findings:

- The number of new books published annually in the United States increased about 300 percent between 1975 and 2000, to 122,000 from 39,000.
- Sales of best-selling books during the last quarter-century have grown more than 1,000 percent: The leading title in 1975, *Ragtime* by E.L. Doctorow, sold 230,000 copies; in 2000, *The Brethren* by John Grisham topped out at 2.8 million copies.
- Name-brand writers such as Grisham, Danielle Steel and Stephen King have been the greatest beneficiaries of these increased sales, but literary authors such as Jonathan Franzen (*The Corrections* sold 720,000 copies in 2001) are sharing in this bonanza.
- Works of fiction that earn some of literature's highest honors, the National Book Award, the Pulitzer Prize or selection as a New York Times "editor's choice," were far more likely to appear on *Publishers Weekly's* best-seller lists during 2000 than they were in 1975.

The publishing boom Feldman reports is a welcome rejoinder to the doom-and-gloom mentality that informs so much discussion of American culture: more people are buying better books than ever before — they're also purchasing more books of questionable merit, but hey. The driving dynamic behind this surge is the rise of a better educated, more literate public that seeks to balance its swelling consumption of trash culture with bigger doses of high art (think of books as Metamucil for the soul). Ironically, it is the commercial forces which so many bibliophiles bemoan that have enabled publishers to exploit this literary desire.

Like it or not, we live in a mass culture; books are one of many options people have to fill their leisure time. To thrive in this environment, books must compete on a level playing field against other highly promoted activities such as television, movies, sporting events, etc. Thus the consolidation of publishing — five major houses published 84 percent of the best sellers in 2000 — was necessary for books to have the financial muscle to gain attention in a crowded and expensive marketplace. Similarly, for all their drawbacks, the rise of chain stores such as Barnes & Noble and Internet retailers such as Amazon.com have afforded books a large-scale presence far beyond the capacities of the independent, and indispensable, local bookshops. Size matters in modern America.

Where books once rose or fell on their own steam, aided perhaps by a small ad in *The New York Times*, they are now propelled by sophisticated multimedia advertising programs concocted by the marketing whizzes who calls the shots at the major houses. Writers are coiffed and sheened, their pearly whites scrubbed to blinding perfection so they can dazzle Matt and Katie. This year, for example, aggressive publishers generated huge sales for an array of first novels, including *The Lovely Bones* by Alice Sebold and *The Dive From Clausen's Pier* by Ann Packer. Cynics might charge that publishers have become as adept at manipulation as their brethren in the detergent business. But, as always, the consumer is the final power broker: folks are no more likely to purchase books they don't enjoy than they are to purchase soap that doesn't get their whites white.

However, Feldman also reports that most writers aren't on easy street. Her most astounding finding may be that the vast majority receive almost no promotion. Even the biggest publishers engage in massive triage, anointing a handful of titles for mega-support and ignoring the rest. Earlier this year two authors told me that their New York publishers not only failed to promote their books but discouraged them from arranging their own publicity. As a

book editor I am constantly amazed at how little effort publicists expend to bring even works of strong local interest to my attention.

Feldman also notes that the major houses are no longer interested in publishing “books with a limited potential readership (5,000 copies and under).” Those authors are increasingly turning to university and other small presses with little marketing clout. Renowned Farrar, Straus & Giroux editor Elizabeth Sifton told her, “by the 1990s it was clear that editors were valued for the deals they could do, not for work well done or talent nurtured.”

That is not happy news, but it is mitigated by two factors. First, despite their concentrated marketing strategies, publishers continue to print boatloads of books. Second, there is no evidence that small books are experiencing declining sales. Authors destined to sell only 5,000 to 15,000 copies may be better served by university and boutique presses, which lack promotional power but will answer their calls.

Readers can take heart from Feldman’s report. Good books have a firm footing in America’s mass entertainment culture — though a network television show that draws the same size audience as a mega-selling book is often taken off the air. Aggressive marketing has made it far easier to learn about the books everyone is talking about. But many good books are off the radar. Nowadays, savvy readers must think like good detectives, who always consider the usual suspects but never fail to develop less obvious clues that can lead them to their desired quarry.

## **Robert Burgin**

Obviously, as someone who trains librarians and consults with libraries and someone who has been a librarian, the future of reading is of interest to me.

On the one hand, I feel good about the future of reading. *Harry Potter* is a phenomenon. Bookstores are thriving. There are more public libraries in the United States than McDonalds. You have to read to use the Internet. Web logs — which you read — are the big thing.

On the other hand, I do have some concerns. The overt enemies of reading are as evident in the real world as they are in the fictional world of Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451* — from those who burn *Harry Potter* to those who try to remove books from libraries to those who try to prevent open access to the Internet.

I recently visited Europe and saw Bebelplatz in Berlin, where the Nazis held their first “burning of the books” on May 10, 1933. There’s a beautiful monument there, which consists of an underground library with empty shelves that represent the books that were burned. So we know that it can happen. It isn’t just science fiction.

In some ways, though, I worry more about a character in a William Gibson novel who says he never got “that reading thing.” I worry that reading will be marginalized, relegated to the status of playing music or speaking a foreign language, something that only a few people do.

Because the same technology that promotes reading through electronic books or Web logs also enables illiteracy (through speech synthesis and voice recognition) and provides competition for reading — movies, television, the Sims.

In the end, I do think that reading will survive. People still walk, after all, even though we have technologies that take the place of walking. Why? Because walking is more than just a means of transportation. And people will still read — because reading is more than just a way to get information.

I also believe that people will still read because of the dual nature of reading, which reflects the dual nature of people. We humans are individual but communal. We live much of our lives alone, but we also live much of our lives engaged with other people. Likewise, we do much of our reading alone, and reading can be very individualistic. I like the books I like. I read to myself.

The characters are my characters.

But reading can also be a communal activity (like Wake Reads Together). We discuss the books we like with one another. We can read to one another. We can discuss what we read and compare notes. We can share.

The painter Jean Corot once said that he hoped with all his heart that there would be painting in heaven. I hope with all my heart, and, I suspect, that there will be reading in the future.

### **Paul A. Gilster**

If Ray Bradbury were an overtly political writer (which thank God he is not), it would be possible to see *Fahrenheit 451* in stark terms. As a cautionary tale, the novel evokes for some the anti-communist furor of the early '50s, the banning of books by certain school boards, and today's Patriot Act, with its presumed outrages against human freedom. Bradbury, however, says it is a commentary on Soviet repression and the horrors of Maoist China. Repression is repression wherever it is found, but Bradbury will not be used by ideological purists left or right. He is and always has been *sui generis*, a sparking iconoclast.

Science fiction is or at least ought to be about looking at things in new ways. *Fahrenheit 451* was an exemplar of this method when it appeared as a short story in 1951, turning the genre's conventions on its ear. It was fitting that the story appeared in Horace Gold's *Galaxy*, a magazine that injected an unexpected humanism into science fictional futures. A writer who dislikes computers and has never learned to drive, Bradbury has always been more interested in how science affects people than in rockets for rockets' sake. His own gadgets, from sea-shell earpieces to wall-sized video screens, become dream-like metaphors for how we humans are going wrong.

What is frightening about *Fahrenheit 451* is that when it was written the story seemed evocative of a possible future, whereas today, it positively nails our most dubious practices. We watch as Montag is chased by police and mechanical hounds, seeing his own pursuit on the screens of the people whose houses he passes, their lust for "reality" television not so different from *Survivor* and its ilk. Equally horrific is Montag's wife, unable to carry on a conversation because of her fixation with the dramas that play on the wall screens of her parlor. What parent hasn't pondered the future of a child, the back of whose head is the only thing visible as he or she works the Nintendo knobs? How unnerving, too, to realize that in Montag's world, censorship did not happen by government decree, but gradually and because of the indifference of a population that had all but given up on reading before it was banned.

In today's America, book burning is all but inconceivable, but indifference is not. Where technology prods us is not in the direction of outright censorship so much as exploitative commercialism. We will have to work to see our enemies in this culture because they refuse to take on the pure, allegorical form of Bradbury's firemen, and for every bewildered school board pondering the meaning of *Huck Finn* there is a much quieter executive trying to stretch his profits at the public's expense. Ponder what is happening to copyright. Extended eleven times in the last forty years, copyright has moved beyond protecting the rights of content creators and has become a cash cow for corporations like Disney, which once happily raided the public domain for material like Snow White, and now seeks to restrict it to keep Mickey Mouse safely in-house. Because of the recent passage of the Sony Bono Copyright Term Extension Act, copyright extends to the author's life plus seventy years. We must reach back into the early 1920s to find books without copyright restrictions.

A Bradburyesque future? No splashing kerosene here, but works are disappearing. Most film created during the 1920s and '30s is not commercially available, and because finding the copyright owners is often impossible,

preservationists cannot restore and distribute them. By the time copyright has expired, these silver nitrate-based films will have been destroyed by chemical attrition. Well over ninety percent of the books not in the public domain are also not in print, their “rights” in the hands of publishers who may not even realize they hold them.

It is time to change copyright law by making it renewable for a slight fee, \$1 to be paid fifty years after publication. Works not renewed (and estimates are that these would total 98 percent of such material) would be freed up for distribution on another Bradburyesque medium, the World Wide Web. How many ideas might take wing from the creative retooling of works in the public domain? This fight, being waged online at [eldred.cc](http://eldred.cc), is one of many that will define how free our information really is in a world where mega-entertainment companies control the screens, and reading books is increasingly seen as an idiosyncrasy.

### **John Kessel**

As a science fiction writer I am generally expected to know something about the future, but the fact is that an sci-fi writer is much more a writer than a prophet. Yes, science fiction stories featured the atomic bomb long before Hiroshima, offered rocket travel to the moon a generation before Neil Armstrong, was full of computers when Bill Gates was a gleam in his father’s eye. But the computer in science fiction wasn’t the one sitting on your desk at home. As far as I know nobody in sci-fi predicted the home computer, the Internet, the fact that I can go home tonight and waste a couple of hours downloading horoscopes from some database on another continent. Most of the futures sci-fi writers have projected in their stories have never come to pass — not even close. To call a sci-fi writer a prophet is like calling a man shooting a shotgun at the side of a barn, who misses it nine times out of ten, a marksman.

Still, the program says I’m supposed to address the question of the place of the printed word in the digital age, and I aim to take a shot at it. Call me back in thirty years and we’ll see whether I’ve hit the barn.

My first observation is that, though the printed book may be under some pressure, the desire to be told a story is a fundamental human trait. I don’t know if there is a gene for stories, but every culture in human history has had its stories, and I don’t hesitate to predict that every human culture always will. The novel happens to be the form in which we in the West have invested most of our storytelling desire since the 1700s, but people told stories before the invention of the novel and will still be telling them if novels should disappear. My nine-year-old daughter is a fan of the computer game the Sims, in which you design a family, give them personalities, occupations, and a place to live, and proceed to follow their lives as they strive to survive and improve themselves. It strikes me that the appeal of the Sims is the fundamental appeal of fiction.

I would not, however, suggest that open-ended games like the Sims will replace storytelling. The advantage a book or a movie has over such games comes from the very fact that one does not control the characters and events. We read *Harry Potter* or watch *The Godfather* because we are caught up in the lives of characters over whose fates we have no control. We sit on the edge of our seats hoping that Harry will escape the clutches of Lord Voldemort or that Michael will prevent Salazzo from killing his father, not knowing whether our hope will be in vain. That’s a fundamental appeal of fiction, and I don’t think other media can eliminate that. So I’m not worried about the future of storytelling. In the future people may get their stories through visual media as well as from books, but they will still need stories.

But what about reading, what about books? As a fiction writer, I have a vested interest in reading. The two things a writer needs are to find a source

of income, and to find an audience. It would not bode well for me if people gave up the practice of getting stories through writing.

Well, I am a teacher as well as a writer, and my experience is that my students are stimulated to read if they are approached with openness and enthusiasm. And that people who learn how to read often want to write. They have stories they wish to tell. Plus, those same media we are worried may distract from reading and writing often foster both. The Internet, for instance, has led to an explosion of Web sites, bulletin boards, discussion groups, and chat rooms, which depend for their success on the ability of participants to read and write. The best of this writing is up to the best writing done anywhere in more traditional media.

Now it may be that future readers will be reading their stories on some device that does not resemble the paper books that we know and love—and I will miss the book, if it should go—but they will still read.

My final observation is perhaps pure opinion, but I think it is an opinion shared by Bradbury in *Fahrenheit 451*. It is that mind—dream, emotion, memory—has the power to affect, and is in some ways more powerful than reality. Not that hard reality does not exist, but most of the realities that shape our daily lives are constructed from ideas. The political, economic, social, legal, religious, and familial webs that surround us are created; even physical objects, as pop singer Peter Gabriel says,

Looking down on empty streets, all she can see  
are the dreams all made solid  
are the dreams made real  
  
all of the buildings, all of those cars  
were once just a dream  
in somebody's head

The state of North Carolina, besides being a collection of hills and valleys and rivers and trees and cities and people, is fundamentally an idea. Words are the medium through which we impose these ideas on reality. In order to manipulate these words, and thus the world we live in, we must be able to read. So as long as there is human culture, then I think reading will be essential to it.