

The Profession of Authorship in Twenty-First-Century America

Matthew J. Bruccoli¹

University of South Carolina

This is William Charvat's definition of "the profession of authorship":

The terms of professional writing are these: that it provides a living for the author like any other job; that it is a main and prolonged rather than intermittent or sporadic resource for the writer; that it is written with reference to buyers' tastes and reading habits. The problem of the professional writer is not identical with that of the literary artist, but when a literary artist is also a professional writer, he cannot solve the problems of the one function without reference to the other.²

But I disagree with my friend's distinction between the literary artist and the professional writer in his otherwise admirable statement. All literary artists who publish their work through the book trade are professional writers. I am concerned here with literary trade books – not with textbooks, reference books, cookbooks, how-to-do-its, sex manuals, or technical books.

The profession of authorship refers to how writers get published and how they make a living. Literature runs on money – although a small share of the money generated accrues to the authors. Accordingly, the profession of authorship can be examined in terms of author-editor-publisher-agent relationships.

1. This paper was prepared for oral presentation at the September 2004 ASANOR Conference in Oslo. Now that it is going into print, I have footnotes to indicate topics and points that were omitted from the original text.

2. Matthew J. Bruccoli, ed., *The Profession of Authorship in American* (Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1968).

These are the factors determining the state of American authorship in 2004:

- Sales are down.
- Readership is down.
- Revenues are up.
- Book prices are up.
- Library circulation is up.
- The chain stores dominate book selling.
- Books are easy to acquire online: Amazon.
- The book clubs are losing ground.
- American publishing houses continue to be combined – notably through acquisitions by foreign-owned conglomerates.
- Publishing houses are run by corporate officers, not editors.
- Agents are increasingly powerful.
- Subsidiary rights are crucial in determining publishing decisions.
- The author's ability to self-promote himself and his work especially on television has become a significant element in publishing decisions.
- Literary editors are less influential and do less editing.
- More than ever, writing is a feast-or-famine endeavor for writers.

Here are some numbers for American book sales in 2003:

- One hundred twenty-eight works of adult fiction sold more than 100,000 clothbound copies.
- One hundred twenty-one works of adult nonfiction sold more than 100,000 clothbound copies.
- *The DaVinci Code* sold 5,724,750 hardcover copies.
- *The Purpose-Driven Life* sold 11,300,000 copies.

Authorship and publishing are jackpot endeavors. In most cases writing is not the writer's main or sole occupation. The proliferating college creative-writing programs provide security for thousands of American writers who would otherwise give up or beg. These programs damage the teachers and harm their students. The teachers – usually second-raters – write less; and the students are given false expectations. Failed writers are teaching writing courses. The virgins are running the brothels.

George V. Higgins acknowledged that teaching writing made it possible for him to keep writing while living comfortably.

But were it not for the fact that I am employed by Boston University, I would have been in serious financial trouble. There are such things as medical insurance and the necessity for pensions and that sort of thing, that you don't think about a lot when you're in your twenties, and your thirties, and even in your forties. It's a good thing for me that when I was in my late forties somebody else thought of it and got me into this line of

work, which I love to do, because it does provide an anchor to windward. Being a freelance writer today doesn't. ...

It is awfully nice to know that when the mortgage comes due each month, you will have the money to pay it and your health insurance too, most of it. And there will be something set aside for your old age, when you become completely toothless and your imagination runs out. Otherwise it's very hard to work solely as a writer in the United States today, if you want to enjoy a nice life.

When you're in your twenties and your thirties, well, maybe not in your thirties, but when you're young, you don't think of that. You can say, "I will give all for art. And when I'm in my fifties I won't have a nice house. So what. Unless I strike it rich, which most writers don't, I won't have a nice car and I won't have a beach house and I won't have vacations in Europe, nice dinners in restaurants, all the fine things that your average stock broker who's forty years old takes as a matter of course. ...

I managed to get most of those things, but it was because I was practicing law, and I did have some good fortune now and again with book sales, *and I have worked like a horse*.³

Higgins published thirty books between 1972 and 2000.

Writing students are given false expectations and are set up for disappointment or worse by the unwarranted encouragement provided by their teachers, who are required to lie in order to maintain the enrollments needed to keep their jobs. The graduate writing programs provide fellowships or assistantships for their students. These students are usually assigned to teach freshman writing classes. The deaf leading the blind.

When Sinclair Lewis, the first American to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature, was invited to speak to a group of Yale students who professed their desires to become writers, he asked them, "Why the hell aren't you home writing?" There are at least 540 American colleges and universities offering undergraduate and graduate degrees (including thirty-nine Ph.D. programs) in writing – plus some 250 conferences, colonies, and centers. The doctorates qualify their holders for tenure-track jobs teaching writing. Higgins again:

I generally discourage my undergraduate students from getting into graduate programs in writing. ... The reason that I generally discourage them is because it can become a dependency. And now you must keep in mind that I have a bias here. I realize that we're not supposed to speak ill of the deceased, especially the recently deceased, but I studied creative writing at Wallace Stegner's center at Stanford. I became convinced that what Mr. Stegner wanted was not writers but acolytes. He had his devotees, his disciples, who'd follow him around campus like he fed them, following him home. I think that's a dependency, and of all the people in the world who should not have dependencies on

3. *Dictionary of Literary Biography Yearbook 1998* (Detroit, Michigan: Gale, 1999).

other people or on instructions, are writers. If you can't do your own thinking, you're in the wrong line of work.⁴

Novelist R. H. W. Dillard, who headed the writing program at Hollins College for thirty-two years, believes that “the teaching of creative writing, when it is done in a supportive and sensitive manner, without any false promises or the building of false hopes, is a very valuable thing for the future of literature and the profession of authorship.” But he deplors the “cancerous over-proliferation” of creative-writing programs: “Greedy universities, looking for cash cows, have leapt into the game, lowering the value of a writing degree by accepting students who never would have been accepted even ten years ago and seeing to it that they get their degrees as long as their tuition is paid.” Moreover, Dillard states that “it is immoral for universities to promise prospective students that a degree from their programs will gain them a writing career and a teaching job.”⁵ Betrayal, debt, and heartbreak on the New Grub Street.

Professional writing can't be taught. Gifted or promising writers can be advised, but the untalented ones are doomed. The good ones are born that way. The more they write, the better they get. Dr. Johnson was partly right when he declared that “No one but a blockhead ever wrote except for money.” Freud was closer to the truth when he observed that writers write for three things: money, fame, and the love of beautiful women. Most writers write because they can't help themselves. This compulsion afflicts the talented and the untalented, the promising and the unpromising. The no-talent failures as well as the best-selling junk writers are convinced of their literary merit.

The creative-writing boom has resulted in the lowering of literary standards. About 175,000 new titles were published in 2003, but it is impossible to determine how many qualify as literature. It is estimated that 20,000 trade books were published in cloth or paperback in 2003: fifty-five per day for 365 days or seven per hour during a working day. If half of them – 10,000 – were fiction, that makes it twenty-seven per day. Most of these are “genre” or “category” books: romance and bodice-rippers, sci-fi and fantasy, mystery and crime. Publishers admit that too many

4. *Dictionary of Literary Biography Yearbook 2002* (Detroit, Michigan: Gale, 2003).

5. Letter to Bruccoli.

books are now being published; they agree that the other publishers should cut back. The reason for the spewing-forth of unnecessary books is that they feed the editorial machine and contribute to the overhead. Apart from manufacturing, it costs relatively little to add five or ten books to the list of a large house. Editors no longer edit, except for their star authors. The line-editing and copy-editing that were once routinely performed in-house are now farmed out to free-lancers who are really proof-readers. The current crop of American volumes provides dismaying evidence that un-edited books are being routinely published.

The continuity of the author's relationship with an editor and a house – before and after the book is published – now rarely obtains. John Jakes – a blockbuster author if ever there was one – who ought to command editorial attention, isn't getting what he used to get:

It's a truism in the business that so-called line editing is a thing of the past (editors now specialize in "acquisition"). Whether this is 100% true, or not, I act as though it is, and spend far more time combing through a manuscript line editing than I did even fifteen years ago. [Julian] Muller, [Joe] Fox, and [Herman] Gollob were all superb experienced editors who not only corrected line by line, word by word, but often suggested new directions for a scene, or the entire story.⁶

A personal note: Albert Erskine of Random House required me to defend single words and punctuation marks in my typescripts. It is reported that authors who can afford to do so are hiring their own "personal editors" because their publishers do not provide the help they formerly expected and received. The increase in personal imprints, invented by William Jovanovich – "A Helen and Kurt Wolff Book" – within large houses is a response to authors' needs for editorial guidance and attention. As authors move from publisher to publisher in quest of better deals, the author/editor relationships become one-night stands or one-lunch stands. The author/agent relationship is replacing the author/editor relationship.

In the twenty-first century and in every other century since the beginnings of professional authorship in eighteenth-century England, literary publishing has been supported by the authors. Authors underwrite literature. The authors get the small piece of the publishing pie. For a so-called "mid-list" novel that sells 5,000 copies at \$30, the money pie is \$150,000. The author gets 10 percent of the list price: $\$3 \times 5,000 = \$15,000$ – of

6. Letter to Bruccoli.

which an agent takes 15 percent; the retailer gets at least a 40 percent discount, which is $\$12 \times 5,000 = \$60,000$. That leaves $\$75,000$ for printing, binding, distribution, promotion, overhead, and the publisher's profit. If the manufacturing price per book is $\$5$ per copy – $\$25,000$ for 5,000 copies – the publisher is left with $\$50,000$ to cover promotion, distribution, overhead, and profit. Overhead – including $\$100$ lunches – involves creative accounting. The corporate officers do better than the authors. Publishing houses claim that their return-on-investment is only two percent or three percent. They must be altruists, bad businessmen, or liars.

In an unfinished fictional treatment of his publisher, Charles Scribner's Sons, Thomas Wolfe ironically observed:

The mythology of publishing was this:

That publishing was different from other forms of capitalistic enterprise in that it was not influenced by the profit motive. True, an author's works occasionally sold in sufficient quantities to reward the publisher with a profit – a very modest one, one was told, in no ways commensurate with the outlay of time, expense, labor, care and risk that had been involved. But even when this happened, and there was a small profit, it was used mainly for the purpose of making up the deficits incurred by the publication of scores of books which had not sold at all. Indeed, one was told that "the average book" did not even pay for itself; if a publisher could just break even on the cost of publication, he was lucky. If one enquired why the publisher published so many books with no hope of selling them, the publisher replied he published them because of his interest in literature, because he took pride in the publication of good books, regardless of whether they sold or not; publishing thus became a kind of handmaiden to the fine arts.⁷

The author who is not a star usually – not always – receives an advance against royalties ranging from $\$10,000$ to $\$40,000$ – which doesn't support him during the year or two or three while the book is being written and produced. The first printing for a mid-list novel ranges from 5,000 to 20,000 copies – the high figure for a novel the publisher has decided to push. Publishers over-print because it is cheaper to remainder or destroy unsold copies than to order a second printing. The usual time from delivery of the typescript to book publication is nine months. The publisher retains all royalty earnings until the advance has been earned back. The author is therefore broke when the book is published and stays broke for at least another year unless he gets an advance for another book.

"Gone today, here tomorrow," Alfred Knopf remarked about returns.

7. Wisdom Collection, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

The bookstores are permitted to return unsold copies for full credit. This system may benefit the publishers – which I don't believe – but it does not benefit the writers.⁸ The returns system encourages over-printing and probably increases the selling price of the book. Clothbound returns average at least thirty percent; paperback returns are in the fifty-percent range. Authors receive no income from returned books. Returns delay royalty payments because publishers withhold a portion of the authors' royalties in anticipation of returns. By the way, there is no good reason why, in the age of computers, royalties are calculated twice a year. The bad reason is that publishers collect interest on unpaid royalties, referred to as "the float." The author does not earn interest on his money; the publisher does.

Writers cannot make a living from book sales alone except for the so-called blockbuster books. Library circulation is up in America. There are 9,129 public libraries spending \$1,125,000,000 on books per year. There are 3,527 academic libraries and 93,861 school libraries; it is impossible to determine how much they spend on literature acquisitions. American authors do not benefit from library readership, apart from the copies bought by libraries. There is no other occupation in which the maker's product is given away. In the UK and certain other European countries, the Public Lending Right brings authors a minuscule royalty based on library circulation.⁹ George V. Higgins was ungracious to readers who told him that they had reserved his new novel at the library. He rightly felt that they had just informed him that his novel wasn't worth buying. I concur: readers should support authors by buying their books. Libraries are for scholars or for paupers.

The figures on authorial earnings provided by the 1994 survey of Authors Guild and Dramatists Guild members disclosed that of the 637 responders, twenty-four percent received no income during the first half of 1993, and sixteen percent earned less than \$1,000. These figures are useless because the sample was meaningless. The 2004 survey by Poets & Writers disclosed that on the average 14 percent of creative writers' annual income came from writing; but 54 percent of the respondents

8. In 1981 William Jovanovich attempted to buck the returns practice. The booksellers refused to order the non-return books, and the other publishers did not join Harcourt Brace Jovanovich's effort.

9. The American tax laws are not kind to writers. For example, a writer cannot claim tax relief for donating his papers to a library; but his widow can.

earned nothing from writing. These failures are not professional writers. They are hobbyists. A writer lives by writing or tries to. A better survey published by Columbia University in 1986 revealed that most American authors were unable to support themselves from their writing. The median annual income from writing was \$4,775 or \$4.90 per hour for 20 hours per week. Two percent of American authors earned more than \$80,000 in 1979. Why should we expend sympathy on these people who obviously aren't sensible about their career choices? The answer is that despite – or maybe because of – their folly, they provide the most precious and enduring thing in America: our national literature. Major writers matter more than anyone else. Yet there is no correlation between writing a masterpiece – or just writing well – and the income the work brings. The first printing of *The Great Gatsby* sold 20,870 copies and brought Fitzgerald about \$6,260. Indeed, the big money is most often earned by the writers whose books are justly doomed to be forgotten. Nonetheless, civilians nurture outlandish notions about writers, believing that all published books make a great deal of money. This misapprehension probably results from media reports about huge advances for ghosted books by politicians and sex objects.

The celebrated paperback editor/publisher Patrick O'Connor told me that “the hardcover business is in the business of collecting paperback royalties – and has been for years.” The hardback publisher shares in the subsidiary rights: paperbacks, movies, television, and other media. F. Scott Fitzgerald's two-page 1919 contract with Charles Scribner's Sons for *This Side of Paradise* covered subsidiary rights in one sentence: “It is further agreed that the profits arising from any publication of said work, during the period covered by this agreement, in other than book form shall be divided equally between Publishers and said Author.” The current Scribner contract requires twenty-seven pages and includes clauses for the division of these secondary rights or sub-rights:

- Dramatic Rights
- Movie Rights
- Theme Park Rights!
- Radio Rights
- Television Rights
- First Periodical Rights
- Commercial Rights

- Foreign-Language Rights
- British Commonwealth Rights
- Book Club Rights
- Mass Market and Trade Paperback
- Calendar Rights
- Textbook Rights
- Abridgment or Condensation Rights
- Second Periodical Rights
- Transcription Rights
- Electronic Rights
- Audio Rights
- Video Rights
- Digest Rights

The two hundred book clubs – fifty of which are owned by Bookspan and have ten million members – account for five percent of the books sold in America. There was a time when bidding wars between the Book-of-the-Month Club and the Literary Guild were a potential bonanza for authors and publishers; but now they are both owned by Bookspan and do not bid against each other.

The division of the sub-rights spoils is a matter of negotiation, depending on the author's fame and ability to promote himself. Celebrity writers get a bigger cut than literary figures. For the anticipated best-seller of a celebrity writer, the "hard-soft deal" is normal: the cloth publisher acquires all book rights and sells the paperback rights to another publisher or to his own paperback imprint, if there is one. But it can work the other way, and the paperbacker acquires all publishing rights up front.

Thomas Whiteside argued in *The Blockbuster Complex* (1981) that publishers are looking for the big book with lots of sub-rights income. Agent Eugene Winick believes that during the past twenty years publishers have been giving marketing support to best-selling authors and denying support to other writers. My position is that best-seller lists – which began in America in 1895 – are pernicious and should be abolished because they substitute fashion for individual judgment. "In the past the literary potential of the author was considered," Winick comments, adding that the conglomerate control of publishing houses "may not tolerate the publication of non-commercial literary books, though nonetheless deserving of publication. If something does not jump off the page for an editor, reflecting commercial possibilities, it would probably be ignored and passed over." Well, why not? Is publishing business, or isn't

it? Yes: but the discovery of genius and the publication of enduring books set it apart from other businesses. That's what the money-men tell the authors when negotiating contracts.

Authors' opportunities for non-book or between-books earnings have been greatly reduced by the shrinkage of the magazine fiction market. The slicks – so-called because they were printed on slick paper – have closed down or cut back on fiction. *The Saturday Evening Post* once supported a tribe of good professionals, including F. Scott Fitzgerald who earned \$4,000 per story at his peak (perhaps \$40,000 in 2004 dollars), and the magazine maintained a huge readership for fiction at five cents and ten cents a copy. The pulp magazines of the Twenties and Thirties were printed on wood-pulp paper and sold for a dime. At a penny or two cents per word they kept writers alive during the Depression and provided a place for them to learn their trades. The pulps were mostly genre-focused and produced Hammett and Chandler, as well as a flock of notable sci-fi writers. The once-flourishing mass-market paperback originals that provided a training-ground for writers – including Kurt Vonnegut – have dried up.¹⁰

Authors can supplement their incomes on the lecture or reading circuit – usually at colleges and universities. The remunerations range from \$3,000 for minor poets and one-book novelists to \$40,000 for literary stars and celebrities. These personal appearances are normally combined with book-signings, which increase royalties.

The main problem for a writer – apart from eating and drinking – has never changed: how to get published. My publisher friends assure me that “Good books always get published.” How do they know about the good books that don't get published? It is my impression that the odds against the publication of literature have increased. One guess is that one out of 15,000 unsolicited submissions is accepted. Self-publishing – as opposed to vanity publishing – is becoming an increasingly viable option for writers who lack trade connections. A writer can arrange to print 500 paperback copies of a book for \$3,500-\$4,000 and then self-promote and self-market them. Apart from providing the satisfaction of seeing the

10. Commentators with steady incomes denounce writers who sell out. One of the putative forms of selling out is writing for the movies or television. An additional chapter is required to discuss this aspect of authorship.

book, self-publishing may help the writer to find an agent or publisher. Self-publishing is related to on-demand printing, which permits a publisher to reprint a back-list book a few copies at a time – thereby keeping it in print. Lightning Source, the largest provider of print-on-demand titles, produced nine million copies in 2002-2003. The average print run at the Digital Book Center (Edwards Brothers) is twelve to fifteen copies.

Long ago people presumably became publishers and editors because they cherished literature and wanted to be associated with writers. Bennett Cerf and William Jovanovich were proud of their authors and maintained warm relationships with them. Maxwell Perkins's devotion to authors was once regarded as an ideal for editorial conduct. In this century writers have become a necessary nuisance. The process of publishing excludes authors unless they are needed to peddle books. National Book Award winner Mary Lee Settle has elegantly observed that "a whole industry depends on us and treats us like shit."¹¹

The personal literary culture of American publishing has diminished. Increasingly I deal with un-read book-dopes who are making publishing decisions. It offends them if I refer to any work of literature published before 1990. An editor at Scribner – once the noblest name in American publishing – angrily asked me, "How do you know about the books you keep talking about?" Publishing values and standards are shaped by what sociologists call the publishers' "reference groups." The book-dopes pal around together and make publishing decisions on the basis of what people like them like. There used to be the shared conviction that the author's job was to write masterpieces and that the publisher's job was to publish masterpieces. I have known editors and publishers who believed it. They are all dead. Writers don't set out to write masterpieces. They write books that somebody else – beginning with the editor – recognizes as masterpieces. Now America is in an era of no great books. I walk the display aisles at BookExpo, the annual American publishers' launch meeting – at which the chief business is selling rights – and conclude that American publishing is dominated by the quest for best-selling ghost-written memoirs of meretricious celebrities. For whom are the publishers publishing? The First Amendment does not require them to manufacture junk books.

11. Letter to Bruccoli.

An unpublished writer isn't a writer. The hardest part of the writing life – apart from writing – is breaking into print. Talent or even genius is not enough. It requires determination – even ruthlessness – luck, and connections. Never under-estimate the force of luck in literary careers. The writing courses may help in providing connections with editors who sometimes serve as visiting lecturers. Anything a writer does to achieve publication is understandable and even forgivable. Since most of these writing programs have their own little – very little – journals, they provide places for their students to have their work printed – not the same thing as publication. And maybe, somebody with influence may read it. Maybe ...

George Garrett, the distinguished novelist and Hoyns Professor of Writing, Emeritus, at the University of Virginia – who has done more for other writers than any writer I know – provided this evaluation of the subsidized journals:

The colleges want maximum visibility from their writers. To gain this they need places to publish.

The whole setup is a DISINCENTIVE to adventurous or experimental work. Likewise for any ideas that are not comfortably trendy and safe.

Thus so much recent American writing is so bland and insignificant.¹²

The Directory of Literary Magazines for 2001 lists 408 in America – probably a low figure – exclusive of uncountable on-line endeavors. Most of them are university-sponsored, and most of them publish poetry. How else can a poet get published? The 125 university presses in America published 12,000 new titles in 2003. Of these 125 presses, twenty-one publish volumes of original fiction and thirty-four publish books of verse. University presses don't sell many copies of new literary works – or of anything else – but they provide exposure. Louisiana State University Press hit the jackpot with *A Confederacy of Dunces*, but that was a happy fluke.

When Elmore Leonard asked his agent to name the most lucrative kind of writing, H. N. Swanson told him, "Ransom notes." He was wrong. The most lucrative kind of writing is scholarly books published by university presses for junior faculty – who are not professional writers. University

12. Letter to Bruccoli.

presses publish books written by academic types who are rewarded by promotion and tenure. A scholarly book that may bring an assistant professor a couple of hundred bucks in royalties can be worth hundreds of thousands of dollars to him or her in promotion, tenure, and lifetime salary increases.

After a young writer achieves the miracle of publication, he needs more luck to get his book noticed and sold. Pat O'Connor flatly states that "in books, everything is distribution. There is nothing but distribution."¹³ Obviously publishers can't devote equal effort to the marketing and distribution of all then-books. Therefore, most books are published in obscurity and vanish. Book-review venues have shrunk. There are four newspaper book-review supplements in America – in New York, Washington, San Francisco, and Los Angeles. A handful of newspapers have weekly book-review pages. Most newspapers do not even review books. The great-god-telly competes for reading time, but it can sell books. The Oprah Book Club selected forty-eight titles in six years – all of which became best-sellers. Her 2003 selection of Steinbeck's *East of Eden*, originally published in 1952, sold 1,700,000 trade-paperback copies.

There is a critical establishment – largely operating in the groves of academe – that can make an author's reputation.¹⁴ Reviewing and criticism in American literary journals is controlled by and addressed to constituencies of politics, gender, race, and sexuality. They write for each other. Authors who are connected are rewarded with praise, prizes, recognition, promotion and tenure, contracts, and even book sales. It is hard for a writer who is just a writer to get inducted into this mafia. In moments of disgust I seek comfort in Samuel Johnson:

Of the innumerable authors whose performances are thus treasured up in magnificent obscurity, most are forgotten, because they never deserved to be remembered, and owed the Honour which they once obtained, not to judgment or to genius, to Labour or to art, but to the prejudice of faction, the stratagem of intrigue, or the servility of adulation.¹⁵

13. Letter to Bruccoli.

14. A separate chapter on how literary reputations are made is required. Who are the opinion-makers or taste-makers? Who has the clout? Is there a lit-crit establishment?

15. *The Rambler* 106 (23 March 1751).

If the chain stores – Barnes & Noble, Borders, Books-a-Million – don't order a book, it is stillborn. They charge \$10,000 per month for displaying a book front-out at the end of the shelf and at eye-level. It costs the publisher \$3,500 to \$5,000 per week for front-of-store placement. Apart from the mystery of why publishers should accede to this extortion, the lesson is that the chains control the market; and publishers can only pay the bribes for sure winners. Moreover, publishers routinely submit proposals or typescripts to the chain buyers for guidance in making publishing decision. If publishers and editors don't have confidence in their own judgment, they are in the wrong line of work.¹⁶

Publishers have always insisted that books sell by word-of-mouth – not by advertising. In 2004 that means getting on television. Not only does the author have to write well: now he is expected to sell himself and his book. This factor has always operated: think of Mark Twain and Ernest Hemingway, who mastered the fame game. But their fame had something to do with literature; the current celebrity writers are celebrated for being celebrities – not for their words on paper.

There are now two cultures: the print culture and the electronic culture. A 2004 survey determined that half of Americans do not read one book a year – which I suspect is an inflated figure. This is not a shocking revelation. There have always been non-readers, but the new threat is that reading time has more competition than ever before: television and then computers. There is a population of people who prefer to get their information on the screen. The libraries are full of them.

The principal uncertainties about the conditions of authorship in the twenty-first century are connected with the expansion of “electronic publishing” – which isn't publishing. More and more books are available gratis on-line – some of them in violation of copyright. Apparently there are a couple of generations who find it comfortable to read this way and even prefer to read newspapers on the screen. No decent comment seems possible. A larger threat to the print book is the E-Book – the book-format electronic reading device which holds the texts of five hundred real books and permits 10,000 page-views. The Scribner experiment of

16. Barnes & Noble has commenced publishing books – now usually reprints or coffee-table volumes. It seems inevitable that with hundreds of outlets the book chain will enter trade publishing – unless the Feds interfere.

making all of Hemingway's books available by E-Book was a commercial failure, probably because the device is still clumsy and expensive (\$370). The price will come down, and the mechanism will be improved. Authors require readers. Books require readers. "Nothing can replace the book! Nothing will replace the book!" So proclaim readers born before 1960 or 1970. Judging from my students, book readers are a perishing breed.

Publication is the essential act of authorship. The ways in which new and old literary works are produced and published will change in the twenty-first century. So will the Profession of Authorship in America. The only certainty is that writers will go on writing.

Every great book is a miracle. We try not to think about the unpublished masterpieces.