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Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos introduces his company's latest e-reader in September. Amazon has in many ways been a boon to writers and readers, but many now wonder about its ultimate intentions.

WRITERS, TECHNOLOGY, AND THE FUTURE

These are hard times for those who live by the pen. But technology will not decide their fate. The future of writers—and the articles, novels, and nonfiction books they create—ultimately rests with those who read them.

BY EDWARD TENNER

THE WILSON QUARTERLY AUTUMN 2012

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WRITING FOR A LIVING IS A UNIQUE profession. It's also a relatively young one, dating essentially from the 18th century; the literary historian Alvin Kernan has called Samuel Johnson's 1755 letter to Lord Chesterfield, in which Johnson proudly declared his independence of aristocratic patronage, "the Magna Carta of the modern author." There's a kaleidoscope of genres and a scale of incomes from effectively subminimum wages to seven figures. Most of all, writing is a profession that millions of people would like to join, at least part-time. To the alarm of critics such as the essayist Joseph Epstein, one survey revealed that more than 80 percent of Americans believe they have a book in them.

Today, many worry that technology, an ally of authorship since 19th-century innovations slashed the cost of printing, may no longer be so healthy for Samuel Johnson's ideal of writing supported by the purchases of a growing literate public. Fifty years ago, almost a generation before the introduction of personal computing, the prospects for authorship looked bright. *The New York Times* reported in 1966 that publishing executives were

concerned that their industry's profitability might make them the target of hostile corporate takeovers. The next year, CBS paid a premium price of \$280 million in a friendly acquisition of the venerable imprint Holt, Rinehart, and Winston. IBM and RCA had already bought into the burgeoning publishing industry, believing that the growth of college enrollments promised an expansion of the book market.

The Great Society era seemed a bonanza for publishers and authors, the vanguard of the new "knowledge workers" celebrated by the popular management guru Peter Drucker. Trade book publishers saw revenues grow 10 to 12 percent annually in those golden years, including an 18 percent jump in 1966 alone. Textbook publishers did even better. Books of all kinds were in high demand.

Sadly, the idyll was short lived. In 1969, when President Richard Nixon called for a large increase in federal support for the arts and humanities, he noted that many cultural institutions found themselves in "acute financial crisis." By 1971, publishers were struggling with inflation and stagnant markets. Not only

was the Great Society's plan for leveling upward in trouble; the New Frontier's notion of diffusing high culture downward to the masses was also losing ground. Campus protests and counter-cultural lifestyles had alienated many in the middle class from the universities and what they represented. It did not help that the style of youthful rebellion had changed, with early activists such as Mario Savio, leader of the mid-1960s Free Speech Movement at the University of California, Berkeley, and a serious graduate student who went on to a physics scholarship at Oxford University, giving way to the likes of the Yippie pranksters Abbie Hoffman (author of *Steal This Book*) and Jerry Rubin.

Today, publishing is the weakest link in the old media-entertainment-education nexus. Rupert Murdoch's giant News Corporation is spinning off its lagging newspaper and book publishing operations from its Fox entertainment business. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, a venerable book publisher, filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy earlier this year, laden with \$3 billion in debts.

There are many other gloomy signs for the future of reading and writing. The plight of newspapers is well known, summed up in the Pew Research Center's report *State of the News Media 2012*:

The papers' print advertising revenues dropped by \$2.1 billion in 2011, while online revenues increased by only \$207 million—a 10:1 differential, even larger than in the previous year. Magazines have also been losing circulation and advertising, reaching what *New York Times* media correspondent David Carr has called, with some exaggeration, “the edge of the cliff.”

Only a few decades ago, corporations were eager to get into book publishing.

Most authors consider retail bookstores a cornerstone of their effort to build an audience for their books—places where the personal recommendations of staff members and readers' accidental discoveries can work wonders. (John Kennedy Jr., who once startled me with a telephone call inviting me to write for his magazine *George*, explained that he had come across my book while looking for another in a store.) But bricks-and-mortar booksellers are reeling. The bankruptcy of the Borders chain last year shuttered almost 400 stores. The other major chain, Barnes & Noble, is struggling. The news is worse among



The collapse of the Borders chain last year wiped out nearly 400 bookstores and cast a pall of gloom over partisans of the written word.

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independently owned bookstores. Their leading trade group lost more than half its membership between 1993 and 2008.

No wonder even some of the most commercially successful authors see the heavens darkening. In February, the popular novelist Jodi Picoult (50 million copies in print) told a reporter from *The Times* of London that the trend toward electronic publishing, with its lower royalties, has been reducing her income. “If you sell the same number of books now as you did a year ago you will make a third less money,” she said. “In America my sales are now just shy of 50-50 print to e-books this year.”

Some detractors of the publishing industry, such as the author and marketing specialist Seth Godin, foresee a totally new world: “Who said you have a right to cash money from writing? The future is going to be filled with amateurs, and the truly talented and persistent will make a great living. But the days of journeyman writers who make a good living by the word—over.”

Such dire predictions are hypnotic. Cultural pessimism was a growth industry even in what we think of as print’s golden age a century and more ago, when a burgeoning literate public was not distracted by radio or Hollywood,

let alone television. The taste for gloom is so strong that it even brings old books back to life. The philosopher Allan Bloom's *Closing of the American Mind* (1987) became a surprise million-copy popular hit and was recently reissued in a 25th-anniversary edition. The critic Sven Birkerts's *Gutenberg Elegies* (1995) has likewise been reissued. These and other gloomy tomes have recently been one-upped (one-downed?) in curmudgeonly provocation by the science writer and cultural critic Nicholas Carr's *The Shallows* and the English professor Mark Bauerlein's *Dumbest Generation*. No wonder some psychological researchers believe that negativity bias is an innate feature of the human mind.

In today's market, greater numbers of prose writers than ever before are able to sell 100,000 copies of a book.

Yet despair is not universal. When I spoke with him by telephone, David Fenza, executive director of the Association of Writers and Writing Programs, the largest academic organization in creative writing, argued that publishing

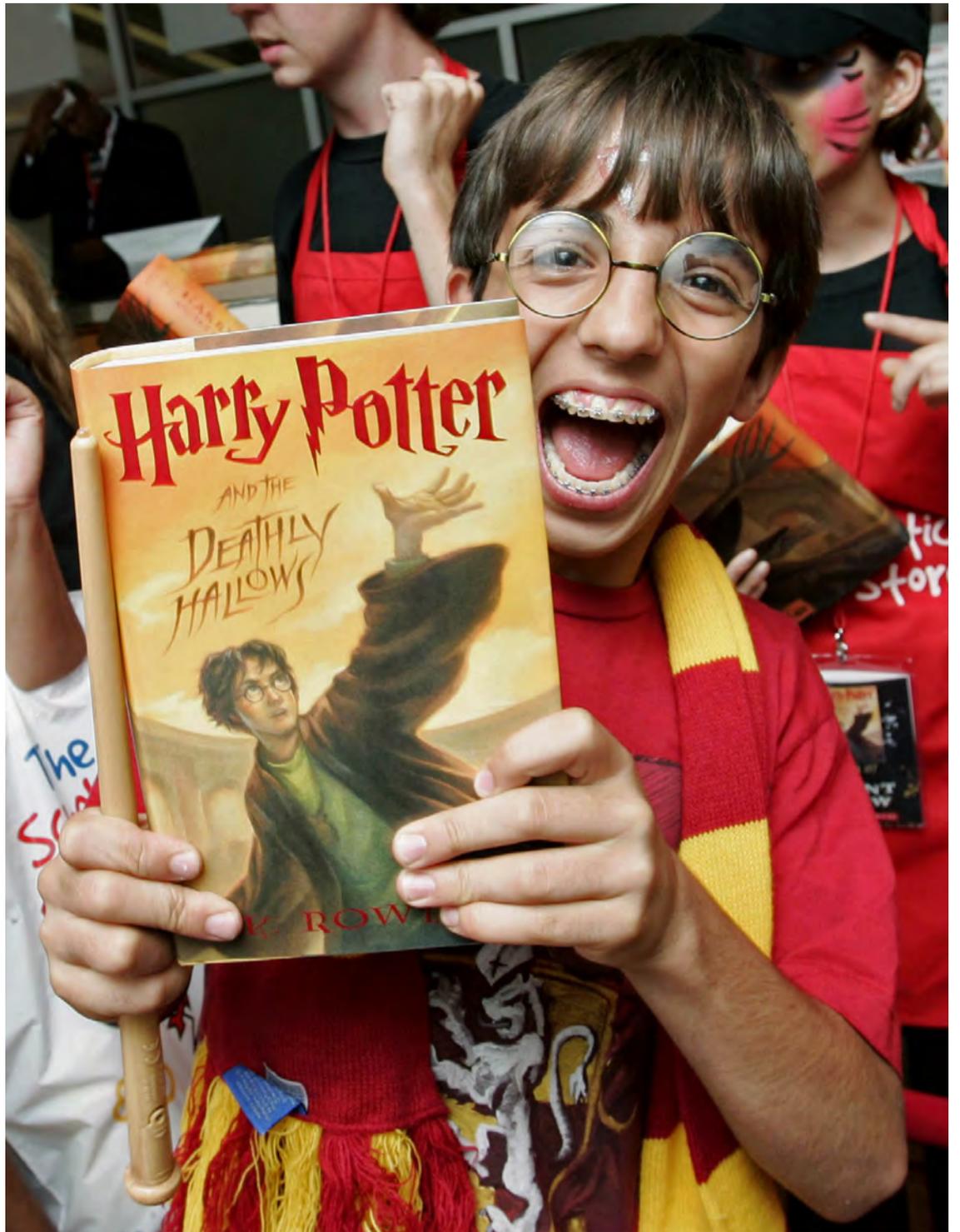
is more vigorous, and more open to a diversity of voices, than ever. He rejected the idea that it's harder for writers to succeed, observing that greater numbers of prose writers than ever before are able to sell 100,000 copies of a book, and greater numbers of poets to sell 10,000 copies. In many universities, the creative writing major has become an alternative to pursuit of the conventional English degree, attracting many students who love reading but not necessarily the latest hyper-specialized scholarly trends in the humanities.

That is only one reason to hope that a more vigorous and participatory culture is arising among at least some young people. The short story, which once flourished in popular magazines, has found a modest revival in *One Story*, a nonprofit print magazine that now has 15,000 subscribers and will soon be complemented by a new publication for teenagers. Book industry statistics also argue against cultural despair. American book publishers reported small but notable gains in the number of books sold (print and digital) and in net revenue during the difficult years from 2008 and 2010, according to *The New York Times*. (The numbers have since remained essentially flat.) Children's books have been a particular bright spot, thanks

partly to continuing enthusiasm for the Harry Potter stories. Of course, pinched revenues are disappointing, and newspaper and magazine closings hurt writers and readers. But is today's hyperangst justified, especially at a time when many industries would be happy to be in steady state? After all, as the *Atlantic* blogger Derek Thompson points out, the revolution in digital music slashed recording industry revenues by 57 percent in just a 10-year stretch after 1999.

However, there are two sets of pressures that rightly concern authors: the squeeze and the crush. The squeeze is the result of technology's dilution of attention time and spending power; the crush is the product of overreach by oligarchic intermediaries and insurgent information consumers.

The squeeze, a growing supply of words competing for limited amounts of reader time, is partly a reflection of the popularity of writing as a career. Technological change has lowered what



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The book world needs a bit more magic than Harry Potter alone can provide, but the series' runaway success is one promising sign that young people can still be drawn into the world of books.

economists call the "barriers to entry" in writing. This phenomenon helped push the number of books published in the United States from 240,000 in 2003 to more than 347,000 in 2011. Technology has also allowed the already prolific to become more so. The invention of the typewriter in the 1860s made editors' lives easier, but hardly changed the pace

of writing itself. (Think of the literary output of Dickens and Thackeray, or the nearly 20,000 letters Thomas Jefferson is known to have written.) Computers have been a different story, as the experience of the masterly British historian Roy Porter shows. “The steady stream of books,” the *Guardian* said in Porter’s 2002 obituary, “became an avalanche once he had mastered the computer.”

There is also more pressure on established writers and editors to generate content. Newspaper staff must now blog, tweet, and write Facebook posts in addition to doing their primary jobs, an existence Dean Starkman of *The Columbia Journalism Review* characterizes as a kind of journalistic hamster wheel. The quest for Web traffic, he argues, has been diverting precious resources from the core mission of journalism. In 2010, Demand Media, operating sites such as eHow.com and employing thousands of minimally paid freelancers, published 4,500 articles per day, mainly on practical topics from health and careers to home repair, and drew more Web traffic than *The New York Times*. The early assumption that high-quality professional writing would prevail on the Web has proved too optimistic.

If the squeeze is putting pressure on writers’ income, the crush is threatening

it more radically. The crush is not the direct result of electronic publishing, which is not inherently good or bad for writing as a business. Indirectly, though, the electronic book brings with it two opposing but equally disturbing trends, monopoly and piracy.

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Today, the challenge to writers is not so much oligopoly as the prospect of hegemony by a single company, Amazon. Until recently, authors could regard it as one of their best friends. It has let large and small publishers alike find readers, especially for backlist titles and other slow-selling books few retailers would stock. It has encouraged discussion of books among its customers, let authors set up personal pages on its site, and made it easier for customers to discover other books by favorite authors.

With the advent of Amazon’s aggressively promoted Kindle readers, the picture has darkened. The long-tailed, friendly underdog has been turning alpha Rottweiler. Unlike vendors of competing

readers and tablets, including Apple and Barnes & Noble, Amazon wants to do more than sell platforms for reading the electronic content it sells. It appears to be promoting self-publication through its site as an alternative to—indeed, a replacement for—conventional publishing. (Seth Godin briefly worked with Amazon in one such effort to supplant traditional publishers.) In his annual letter to shareholders this year, Amazon CEO and founder Jeff Bezos argued that “even well-meaning gatekeepers slow innovation,” a jab at publishers. He was surely cheered when the U.S. Department of Justice filed an antitrust suit charging Apple and five major publishers with colluding to keep the prices of e-books high and prevent price cutting competition between Amazon and its rivals. (Three of the publishers recently settled the claim.) Critics of Amazon argue that its ability to market bestsellers at a loss threatens publishers’ ability to promote new authors. They fear that the company will make nightmares of downward-spiraling compensation come true. Senator Charles Schumer (D-N.Y.) has criticized the Justice Department, arguing that “the suit could wipe out the publishing industry as we know it.”

The novelist Scott Turow, president of the Authors Guild, acknowledging

that Amazon has been good for him personally and calling the Kindle “a great innovation,” has nonetheless warned, “It’s only rational to fear what they’re going to do with this accumulation of power.” Steve Wasserman, writing in *The Nation*, cites what Amazon has already done: When the 500-member Independent Publishers Group refused to accept its demand for deeper discounts on IPG members’ products, it deleted almost 5,000 of the publishers’ digital titles from its site. One independent publisher in Texas declared what many publishers and writers have come to believe: “Amazon seemingly wants to kill off the distributors, then kill off the independent publishers and bookstores, and become the only link between the reader and the author.” At that point, writers could be almost completely at its mercy.

Piracy is the inverse of monopoly. Though there is disagreement about its extent, illegal e-book sharing hasn’t reached the levels of theft that plague film studios and music labels. For some writers, the real threat is not piracy itself but pressure to reduce prices to discourage illegal copying. As the novelist Ewan Morrison has suggested, “In every digital industry the attempt to combat piracy has led to a massive reduction in

cover price: the slippery slope towards free digital content.”

Frightening as they are, the squeeze and the crush do not portend an unavoidably dark future. Previous economic and technological crises have been crucibles of innovation, spurring the emergence of new genres and drawing in new writers. Edgar Allan Poe’s puzzle-based mystery stories such as “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” and “The Gold-Bug” were a commercially minded response to the Panic of 1837, as the Poe scholar Terence Whalen has argued, that introduced the scientific detective to literature. The Panic of 1893 hurt traditional subscription-based magazines but gave rise to a new breed of inexpensive, mass-circulation counterparts that placed heavier reliance on advertisers for revenues. Some of the greatest writing successes of the 1930s were businessmen who had been bloodied by the Crash of 1929: Yip Harburg, who wrote the lyrics of “Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?” and the songs in *The Wizard of Oz*, and Benjamin Graham, who distilled the hard financial lessons he had learned in *Security Analysis*, now considered a canonical work on “value” investing.

It’s no less true for being a cliché that problems are opportunities. The travails of newspapers are due in part

to the public’s impatience with chronic formulaic similarity. As the historian and director of the Harvard University Library, Robert Darnton, a onetime police reporter, observed in a classic 1975 ethnographic study of journalists’ tribal ways, “Nothing could be less competitive than a group of reporters on the same story.” Technology has exposed mercilessly what critics and insiders have long acknowledged.

The structural problems of journalism leave room for innovation, as they did more than a century ago, when the 38-year-old Chattanooga newspaper publishing prodigy Adolph S. Ochs, nearly bankrupt after the Panic of 1893, somehow found backers for a takeover of the struggling *New York Times*, turning it into the first elite newspaper priced for the masses. Are there new Ochses in our midst? The greatest disciple of Benjamin Graham, Warren Buffett, has been acquiring newspapers even as Rupert Murdoch has been spinning them off.

Like newspapers, the print encyclopedia business had a chronic problem, in its case the impossibility of keeping many entries up to date. Yet the nemesis of commercial encyclopedias, Wikipedia, has its own structural limitations. Open editing may correct errors and pile up references and images, but it’s not suited

to creating the kind of intellectual synthesis that the classic 11th edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* achieved more than a century ago. Could a 21st-century counterpart of that landmark work be the future of the encyclopedia?

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What of the average writer? Nobody ever aspired to be an average writer. Apart from technical and contract writing, the profession has always been what economists call a tournament, a competitive environment with only a few big winners, whose successes motivate the rest. It's very possible that the solid middle of the profession will erode further, and a few favored authors will pull farther ahead. The median may decline, but the glittering prizes will remain.

The future depends more on writers themselves than on technology. If they accept the proletarianization thesis, it

will become a self-fulfilling prophecy. If they can show how copyright and good compensation are in the long-term interest of the reading public, if they can mobilize readers to help defeat would-be monopolists of various kinds, if they can use social media to enhance relations with readers, there will still be many disappointed writers, but there will also be new kinds of opportunity. Optimism may fail; pessimism can't succeed. As the sociologist Erving Goffman, whose first book, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), has sold 500,000 copies, put it when his Marxist colleague Alvin Gouldner complained of being treated like a commodity by the publisher they shared: There's nothing wrong with being treated like a commodity as long as you're an expensive commodity. ■

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