

work provides similar miscues, Goodman maintains. For example, when public health and medical professionals list race as a risk factor in osteoporosis (a progressive loss of bone mass), which disproportionately afflicts whites, they are encouraging the mistaken assumption that blacks do not get the disease—and therefore are not in need of pre-

ventive care or other help.

The way for scientists and others to avoid the confusion and false leads—and the encouragement to racism that race thinking provides—is simple, says Goodman: stop using racial classifications and refer to specific traits instead. Why say black or white when “darkly complected” are the truest words?

## *The Mask of the Machine*

“Seeing through Computers” by Sherry Turkle, in *The American Prospect* (Mar.–Apr. 1997), P.O. Box 383080, Cambridge, Mass. 02238.

When the personal computer burst on the world in the 1970s and early '80s, educators believed that a “computer literate” student would need to learn to look “inside” the powerful calculators and understand how they worked, at least in principle. No longer, writes Turkle, a science sociologist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Today, the young learn only how to use the PC as “an information appliance,” becoming marvelously adept, but prey to new information-age illusions.

Before the mid-1980s, computers were not very user-friendly, she notes, and to get them to work, it helped to know something about programming. But increased processing power made it possible to build graphical user interfaces (GUI), “which hid the bare machine from its user.” Apple’s Macintosh desktop computer, introduced in 1984, represented “a way of thinking about the computer that put a premium on the manipulation of a surface simulation.” Then came Windows software. Soon, “people did not so much command machines as enter into conversations with them.” Computer users began to take things “at (inter)face value.”

Computer education in schools now tends to involve learning how to run word processors, spreadsheets, databas-

es, Internet search engines, and other programs. Nothing wrong with that, Turkle writes. But that narrowly practical aim should not be the main goal. Students should be taught how to critically “read” what their computers do and to ferret out hidden assumptions. By playing *SimCity*, for instance, students may find out more about the difficult tradeoffs involved in governing a city than they would from a textbook. But simulations can also be misleading. One young *SimCity* player informed Turkle that “raising taxes always leads to riots,” not realizing that a game based on other assumptions might yield a very different result. In subtle ways, Turkle suggests, the computers we play are beginning to play us.



*Do students see beneath the surface of scenes such as this from the computer game SimCity?*

## ARTS & LETTERS

### *And Not a Drop to Drink*

“The Crushing Power of Big Publishing” by Mark Crispin Miller, and “Gutenberg Unbound” by Tom Engelhardt, in *The Nation* (Mar. 17, 1997), 72 Fifth Ave., New York, N.Y. 10011.

A visitor to a Borders or Barnes & Noble superstore, marveling at the thousands of vol-

umes on view and at all the people busily browsing and buying, might conclude that

reports of the impending death of the book are much exaggerated. And with more than \$20 billion in sales (a record) in 1996, including an unprecedented \$5.7 billion for general-interest “trade” books, who could deny it? Answer: doomsayers Miller and Engelhardt, chairman of the Writing Seminars at Johns Hopkins University and a consulting editor at Henry Holt and Company, respectively.

Once, contends Miller, publishers put money making dreck between covers “so as to subsidize the books they loved (although those books might also sell).” Today, however, he asserts, profitable trash “is not a means but (as it were) the end.”

In fact, adds Engelhardt, anxious publishing executives “in their hearts . . . no longer feel that the book, as a freestanding entity, is sustainable.” In the last decade or so, he observes, “computerization has transformed book production, billing, distribution, and bookstore management. With Amazon.com, the online bookstore, it has even changed the way books are bought.”

In this new environment, says Engelhardt (whose 1995 book, *The End of Victory Culture*, was published by Basic Books, an arm of News Corporation’s HarperCollins until it was folded into the parent firm recently), publishing executives sense “that a book not plugged into a product or performance nexus, that cannot offer a companion movie or capitalize itself in the rush to buy face-out space in the superstores, or give a star performance that steps off the page and onto radio or television, will stumble into

the world as if off a cliff steeply.”

Aside from Norton (the employee-owned publisher of his own forthcoming book) and Houghton Mifflin, some university presses, and a host of minor outfits, Miller points out, America’s trade publishers today belong to eight huge media conglomerates, including Time Warner and Rupert Murdoch’s News Corporation. In only one of these giants—Holtzbrinck, which owns Farrar, Straus & Giroux, St. Martin’s Press, and Henry Holt and Company—“does management seem to care (for now) what people read,” he claims. All the other giants want their publishing arms to show profits of 12–15 percent, comparable to the margins in movies, newspapers, and TV—“but absurd for publishing,” which operated for decades on an after-tax profit rate of about four percent.

Good books are going unpublished, or if published, unpromoted, Miller maintains. And despite the massive displays at the superstores, he says, new titles are given little time to win readers. Books often get only a few months on the shelf before they are shipped back to the publisher to be ingloriously “remaindered.” The backlists of books kept in print are shrinking.

Defenders of today’s book business accuse the critics of “elitism,” and maintain that the publishers are only giving the public what it wants. “If today’s giants are so good at selling to the people,” responds Miller, why are so many of their books such duds? Returns last summer, he notes, reached or exceeded 40 percent of gross sales.

## *The Lone Coachman of the Apocalypse*

In an interview in *At Random* (Spring–Summer 1997) about his latest novel, *The Gospel According to the Son*, a retelling of the story of Jesus written in the first person, Norman Mailer offers some reflections on the novelist’s profession.

*At a certain point I decided that I wasn’t trying to write a definitive work about the period. I wanted to do what I started to do—that is, bring this myth to life using the means of a good novelist. And that made me start thinking about my profession. Because it seemed to me that I work in a valuable and honorable profession that is, most unhappily, on the way out—as much on the way out, I fear, as coachmen on Central Park South. In a hundred years novelists may bear the same relation to world culture that those coachmen do now, the ones who sit outside the Plaza and occasionally drive a couple around in a carriage behind one old horse. That’s the gloomy scenario I see for novelists—a future when best-selling novels will be written by computers. We’re halfway there already.*