

Are Books Going Away ?

I recently had the fun of sitting in my doctor's waiting room for over an hour. Fortunately I had brought a good book. But I became more interested in my fellow passengers in this common ritual. In the course of waiting in this large, very busy medical office, at least fifty people came and went during my own sojourn. Not one of them had brought anything to read. Not a book, not a magazine, not a newspaper. They sat and stared at the walls like fish in an aquarium waiting to be hauled to a higher plain. I felt almost embarrassed that I had a book.

Not long after this experience, I attended a St. Lawrence/Clarkson hockey game in Appleton Arena. Standing at the railing looking down over the crowd below, I could see dozens of students staring, not at the game, but at tiny video screens. Blackberries, iPhones, video games. They were easy enough to pick out, those glowing screens clutched in loving fingers.

And of course, stroll across any of America's university campuses and you may see a handful of students sprawled on the lawn reading books, but you will more likely see scores or even hundreds staring at their personal video screens or talking on cell phones. It has gotten to the point where you can't see any student walking anywhere who doesn't have one hand crooked, holding his phone to his ear. It's become a sort of college student symbol, that crooked hand, like a letter sweater in the 1950s. Someone should do a study to see how many injuries can be attributed to students wandering into traffic or stumbling over steps while concentrating on their video screens and cell phone conversations.

This hi-tech phenomenon has the publishing industry doing back flips as it tries to determine what the wave of the future will be. It has spurred the new e-book, Kindle and other electronic reading devices, which in turn have led to questions about copyright law, as commercial giants like Google and Amazon try to figure out what the next business model will be for books.

The result for authors is not encouraging. Publishing houses have been consolidating for at least a decade. There are fewer and fewer places where you can send your manuscripts for serious consideration. And it is harder than ever for unknown writers to get a hearing, much less make a living. The big houses no longer have the budgets to carry first time authors on their lists. And so we see the same names over and over again on best seller lists. Yet paradoxically, we are told that more books than ever are being published. Hundreds of thousands a year, though many now see the light of day only through university presses, self publishing, vanity presses, print on demand services and so on.

Books are not and I predict will not be going away any time soon. But the method of their production and distribution is changing rapidly. Maybe I was wrong to think that all those tiny video screens at that hockey game were tuned to videos or games. Maybe they were all students reading great literature in the palms of their hands. In class,

students are tempted to ignore the lecture and play a video game. Perhaps at hockey games, they ignore the match in order to read great literature.

Perhaps. But it seems a stretch.