

Fairy Tales about Books

Is the book going away? Should it go away? Recent posts have shown a range of responses, though one narrative seems to be gaining prominence—a narrative that plots the demise of the book.

Within that narrative, the book and digital media struggle for supremacy over a kingdom of readers. The printed book has become the Wicked Queen, powerful yet antiquated. Daily she consults her magic computer screen, asking if she is still the fairest in the land. And then one day the magic screen replies that her digital counterpart is “a thousand times more fair.” The Queen resists, sending her academic henchmen to stifle the emergent forms. But it is futile. The new media will triumph, taking shelter with ordinary (“little”) people and discriminating academic heroes. In the end, the book will die.

Such, at least, is the narrative that emerges in essays like Jeffrey R. Di Leo’s “The Cult of the Book—and Why It Must End.” He tells us that “the culture of the book . . . is no longer tenable,” because print publication is more costly than its digital counterpart. Yet academics continue to “discriminate” against digital publishing, clinging to outmoded notions of the reading experience. “Words may look better in print, and a book may feel better in your hands than a Kindle or an iPad, but the words are the same,” he argues. We must therefore change the ideology of the book, which will result in “the decline of the book.”

Of course we are in a period of experimentation with digital forms, a period that is exciting and fruitful. Yet the emergence of new forms does not mean that old ones must decline. As any student of “Snow White” knows, the protagonist is not a threat until the Queen makes her one. Having internalized the mirror’s judgment—being old renders one ugly and powerless—the Queen begins her unnecessary battle with her stepdaughter. Likewise, the book and digital media are not necessarily at odds but can coexist as related entities—unless we assume otherwise.

Our students model this comfort with literature in a range of formats. In my course on fairy tales, they find information and images online. They also bring me their most beloved childhood books, speaking rapturously of Cinderella and rifling through tattered pages to find an illustration of her slipper. For them, Cinderella sparkles in both print and digital forms.

Perhaps our students can point us to a new fairy tale. In this tale, we can revel in the aesthetic experience of printed books even as we marvel at the opportunities offered by digital forms. We can acknowledge that the love of books is not a “cult,” and we can salute the advances in electronic forms, which are opening up new kinds

of literature. And we can see our way to a new ending for the printed book and digital media: they lived happily ever after.