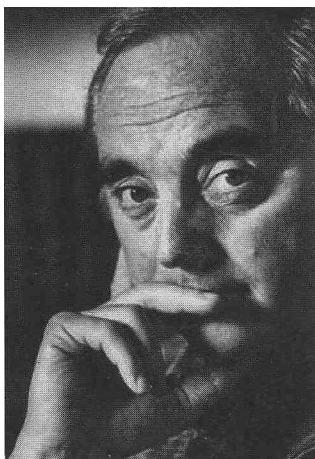


# What's Next for Authors

BY WARREN ADLER

*Submitted by Mr. Adler in response to the Symposium on E-Rights co-sponsored by the Authors Guild Foundation in January, an edited transcript of which appears in this issue.*



The inevitable battle between e-book readers has begun. Unfortunately, the author, the creator of the raw material that will be the principal fuel for the e-book devices, is the least powerful voice in the battle. He is the stretcher-bearer, while the big guns around him boom, threaten and destroy.

As an author, I have been a pioneer in the e-book revolution. The earliest meeting I attended with people gathered to promote the vision of the future for the e-book was 10 years ago. Most were techies and start-up hopefuls. I was the only author in the room. Since then, many of these early e-book dreamers, bloodied and bruised, have opted out of the battle.

At a recent Authors Guild panel that included an e-book publisher who was a former top gun for a print publisher, an executive of a major traditional publishing company, an author and an agent, the e-book pub-hit the nail on the head. She told us that we are in the midst of a revolution.

With Apple having just planted its e-book flag, Amazon changing its pricing structure in response to publisher pressure, Sony refining its approach and numerous tech companies invading the e-book reader field, it should be apparent to everyone that the day of the printed book is kaput. Take a deep breath, gulp if you must, but that's the future. I have been arguing the point as an author for a decade. I have been pummeled and assailed by every counter argument conceived.

The window for the printed book is closing. Print publishers are losing their monopoly on content, dis-

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tribution and marketing. The big box bookstores will slowly implode. The method of branding an author via the traditional media will disappear as print media disappear.

The big author brands so carefully constructed will fade away like old movie stars. Imagine what will happen in the textbook field? How would you like to be a backpack manufacturer?

What we will be left with will be millions of digitized books capable of being downloaded to numerous devices—most of them portable—then flacked and promoted on millions of websites, a cacophony of voices in a multitude of languages that will make the Tower of Babel seem like a lonely outpost on Mars.

As every publisher knows, the way an author gets real traction is by word of mouth, but that requires a starting point. A seed has to be planted. Someone has to tell someone. How will anyone be heard above the chatter?

And how will the author, the creator of content, fare? I am talking here about all types of books, from works of the imagination to instruction, opinion and analysis in every genre that imparts information and knowledge. Book to reader is essentially a one-on-one communication system. Author to reader. Mind to mind.

When I advised the people at Sony who were developing the first in the current generation of e-book readers, I urged them to create a dedicated reader with no distractions, no bells or whistles, no e-mail, no video, no phone, no texting, no music. I was basing my advice on a very personal view of reading. When I read a book I want to concentrate only on the author's work, his or her story, knowledge or instruction.

I think I lost that battle. The trend will be to create a kind of portable living room with every form of entertainment, communication and instruction available via a single device. This will, of course, make it harder for the author to reach his reader, who must navigate a galaxy of temptations competing for his attention. Like a fly fisherman, he must find the perfect fly to hook the trout.

At the Authors Guild panel discussion, I asked the panelists: With the monopolies of content, distribution and marketing disappearing, what can a publisher do for the author when the e-book revolution has transformed the traditional landscape?

The answers were, to be kind, less than satisfactory.

The brutal fact is that the traditional publisher will have to join the e-book world fully if his business is to

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survive. Because the publishers and authors have been late to the e-book table, they have not yet learned how to react. For many it will be too late. It is true that the traditional publisher has the present advantage of knowing the reading marketplace. He has been tracking the literary consumer for ages. He is not to be counted out... yet. Unfortunately, he hasn't been quick enough to arm himself for the revolution and his bottom line performance report card to his (mostly) corporate bosses does not suggest a promising future.

One possible result of all this chaos will be the empowerment of the author. As he sees publishers losing their ability to find an audience for his work, he will have to find a way to empower himself on the wild and woolly cyber battlefield. If he expects to make a living in the hazardous one-on-one communication system of the written word, he will have to find a way—or be forced to keep his day job.

How will an author find anyone to read his work? The answer, if there is an answer, will be found in cy-berniches, families of related websites that share interests and through which authors will gain an audience.

Indeed, authors of the future will probably have to create their own publishing vehicles, yet to be defined, to establish their readership. Perhaps they will ally themselves with other authors seeking like-minded readers. One can only speculate. That buzzing sound you hear is authors, traditional publishers, new e-book publishers, agents, proofreaders, artists and anyone who has been involved or who aspires to be involved in publishing trying to figure out what comes next.

For my part, I call for authors to mount the barricades. You are the shock troops of content. You will have to do for yourselves what others did for you before the revolution. All future monetary splits should favor the author first. It is time for you to take control of your own destiny.