



Beyond the Book

A Podcast Series on the Business of Writing and Publishing

Interview with [Ron Hogan](#)
Recorded at [Tools of Change](#) Conference 2011

For podcast release
Monday, February 28, 2011

KENNEALLY: If you attend enough future of publishing conferences, you begin to think that the future of publishing is conferences. That's not true, of course, but many a conference these days for publishing is looking at digital and where digital is taking the business itself.

And as I say, if you attend enough of these, you also run into some familiar faces, and joining me today on *Beyond the Book* is Ron Hogan, someone I've enjoyed seeing at previous conferences. He's a contributor to Shelf Awareness and a blogger and a proprietor of a website called Beatrice.com. Ron, welcome to *Beyond the Book*.

HOGAN: Thank you for having me. I'm glad to be here.

KENNEALLY: It's good to have you join us and I thought what we might do is sort of have a bit of shop talk, OK, chat about this conference here. We are at the Tools of Change Conference, the big O'Reilly conference in New York, same hotel two weeks apart from Digital Book World. And what struck me attending both of these is the similarities and maybe some of the differences.

Let's start generally. What's your thought about digital publishing in 2011? What are you looking for when you go into some of these seminars and so forth?

HOGAN: Well, I'm looking for practical solutions. I have been involved with the Internet since 1992 when I got my first Internet account the day I entered graduate school, and that was just a few months before the launch of *Wired Magazine* and really just sort of a couple years before Netscape launched, which really kind of kicked off the whole World Wide Web phenomenon. So I have seen at this point a decade and a half of hype about the Internet and the World Wide Web and close to a decade and a half, at least a decade of hype about the e-book.

I can remember when e-books were distributed on little three-and-a-quarter-inch Mac disks, the little hard floppies, and they were basically hypercard stacks, and that was going to be the future of publishing. Obviously, the way the e-books look now is a lot different than the way they did in '93 or '94, but – and I think there's still a lot of hype about what's going on, and one of the things that I look for in conferences like this is presentations that

Beyond the Book

A Podcast Series on the Business of Writing and Publishing

are going to separate the hype from the facts, the ground-level facts about what's going on in the field.

KENNEALLY: Let's talk about that, hype and facts. That's a real journalistic way of looking at it, I think. First of all, what kind of hype do you never want to hear again? If someone utters a phrase or has certain buzzwords in their presentation, are you groaning?

HOGAN: Yeah. I'm tired of hearing about the death of publishing because it's not the death of publishing. At best, it's the death of a handful of companies that were or – looking at it from the future perspective, if these companies die, it's because they were dedicated to a dying model, and I think what we've seen in the last couple years is that even those companies that we thought were at risk of dying are shifting over to the new model. So I don't need to hear about the death of publishing.

I think we all sort of recognize that it's a transition and while I'm a little burned out on the predictions about how fast that half the market is going to switch over to digital sales, I recognize that that at least points to a genuine concern and a genuine awareness of the fact that more and more of the market is shifting over.

I thought Michael Hyatt of Thomas Nelson had a great perspective on that at Digital Book World a couple weeks ago when he sort of pooh-poohed the estimate that half of the market would be digital books by 2015 and said, you know, it's probably not going to be that fast, but just be aware of the fact that the change is coming and in the meantime, you're basically running a print publishing company and a digital publishing company.

KENNEALLY: One of the things about predictions, particularly around publishing, is it's a bit like economics. They say with economists, they've predicted nine of the last two recessions. Nobody ever lost money or position at a fine university by predicting things besides problems and troubles ahead. And the predictions of trouble have been also similarly not realized in publishing.

You mentioned that you're tired of hearing about the death of publishing. What about the death of the book itself?

HOGAN: Well, I also don't believe that the book is going to die out for a number of reasons. One is that the digital economy is not going to completely overwhelm the existing print market for books anytime soon. Even the best predictions that we've seen – or the most aggressive predictions, I should say, that we've seen – are talking about when it's going to be half the market.

Beyond the Book

A Podcast Series on the Business of Writing and Publishing

I think that in a number of cases, one, until the prices drop even further than they have dropped – although they’ve dropped faster than I think a lot of people were expecting – for the dedicated readers and for the smart devices and tablets that are going to host reading apps, that’s something that is going to be crucial to the spread of e-book purchases.

Dealing successfully and persistently with gifting, being able to gift e-books to other people rather than just an e-book certificate or a gift certificate for purchasing e-books, much like you can’t gift somebody an album off of the iTunes. You basically have to buy that \$15 gift card and say, go buy some music. And I think certainly just the sheer act of gifts. People like to give each other real books, especially pretty books. Art books I think are going to be a category, coffee table books, where print is going to continue to matter for some time.

We had a great presentation here at Tools of Change the first morning with Touch Press, Theodore Gray just showing us his version of the iPad edition of *The Elements*, which had some great multimedia effects to it. And he showed a forthcoming book on the solar system that had some great effects to it and a multimedia edition of T.S. Eliot’s “The Waste Land” that had some great presentations in it.

So there are going to be very cool things that you can do in digital books and e-book apps, but at the same time there are some things that you can really only present effectively and most attractively in paper.

And then finally, I was talking about this with somebody recently, and they said, basically, as long as we’re still handling paper money, we’re still going to be buying paper books. As long as you have paper money to walk into a bookstore and take a book out with you, we’re still going to have – so, maybe when we all switch over to a complete debit card economy, that’s when e-books will finally take over.

KENNEALLY: Right. One of the fun of attending conferences like this is to get involved in some of these arguments that are so arcane, so inside baseball, definitions of words, definition of what is a book? Definition of publishing.

I just overheard someone. We’re in the media room here at Tools of Change talking to Ron Hogan, a contributor to Shelf Awareness and proprietor of Beatrice.com. The people we displaced here in the media room, I heard someone say, well, you can’t say publishing anymore. That’s a dirty word. What’s your reaction to that?

HOGAN: Well, that’s the first I’ve ever heard of that and I think it’s kind of silly. What we are is publishers. Margaret Atwood also had a great keynote presentation this morning, the

Beyond the Book

A Podcast Series on the Business of Writing and Publishing

first morning of Tools of Change, where she talked about what is publishing. Publishing is taking something and making it public. And that's still what we do.

Whether what we are making public is information or entertainment – for centuries, what we have done is distribute text-based information or text-based entertainment to increasingly larger audiences as technology has made that more capable for us. And so, I have no problem with the fact that what we do is publishing. We just have to recognize that just as the transition in the 15th and 16th century from illuminated manuscripts, handcrafted, hand-created documents, to mass produced things off of a moveable type printing press, again, we're going to go through a technical transition, which I don't believe in any way sort of disrupts the fundamental mission that we have of disseminating and making public the information and the entertainment that we are passionate about sharing.

KENNEALLY: I agree, and I think that it's important to remember, as I read in a book recently, that while they invented a printing press in the 15th century, it was another century and a half before they invented a business model to go with the technology. So these things do take time and a certain amount of patience is required.

I guess a question I have as you cast your mind back to the days of hard floppies and all the rest was, what do you think has taken book publishing itself so long? Is it that the technology hasn't been sufficient to really carry the weight of a book and now perhaps we've got to that moment with the iPad and some other devices? Or do you think it's the industry reluctant to take the step?

HOGAN: I think there's a certain amount of reluctance there. I think it's interesting that while on the whole – and maybe I'm basing this particularly on the fact that I live in New York, liberal bastion that it is – but I think that on the whole, while the population of book publishing seems to be generally liberal-leaning and probably at best 50-50 liberal-conservative, from a social standpoint or a social political standpoint, I think from a financial perspective, the corporate population of publishing, or the corporate mentality of publishing, is a very fiscally conservative industry and part of that, I think, historically has to do with the fact that this is not an industry of large margins, historically. It's pretty much an industry where you are scraping by meager profits.

And until the point when larger publishing companies were sort of subsumed into even larger conglomerate publishing or conglomerate media companies, which then became that much more covetous of wide profit margins – when you are pursuing wide profit margins, there's certainly a certain amount of risk-taking in what you're going to do, but there's also an equal or greater amount, I think, of playing it safe, of doing what works, thinking that

Beyond the Book

A Podcast Series on the Business of Writing and Publishing

you've got whatever formula you've managed to come up with for whatever level of success that you've been able to come up with, and not trying to reinvent the wheel.

KENNEALLY: I guess what you're saying is, while the conversation may be sort of liberal minded at dinnertime, during the working day, it's a lot more conservative.

HOGAN: I think that that is – yeah. I think that's a good way of putting it, that I think everybody is sort of waiting to see if it will work at the broad level. I think at this point now, everybody's sort of dipping their toes in to try and get it to work, but if they could, they would sort of step back and wait for somebody else to prove that it would work before they all jumped in.

KENNEALLY: Right. So, we're going to know or we'll know more a year from now when Digital Book World returns in 2012 and Tools of Change inevitably following that. I guess I would turn to you finally and ask, Ron, about predictions or expectations or hopeful notes for this whole business, the future of publishing.

HOGAN: Having just said that everybody wants to sit back and wait and let somebody else do the experimentation, I want to qualify that by saying that I think, especially over the last few years, that more and more people have been willing to take the experimentation. You do see people, even within the largest companies, like tiger teams that are willing to and given the freedom to go out and do those kinds of experimentations, to take those steps and to fail or to succeed.

So I think that more and more people are going to make the attempt, and the more attempts that get made, the better odds there are for success and I just hope that as people are continuing to make those attempts and to also to figure out – not just in terms of the actual art of publishing, but we haven't even begun to talk about the retail end.

I think that the retail side of the book economy is going to be radically different in the next 12 months than it is today, February 15, 2011. Who knows who the big players are going to be. We know who some of the big players are likely to be in February 2012, but I think the list of big players will be much different than it is today and we have to figure out what happens when –

Borders represents eight percent of many large publishers' sales for some of their best titles. So what happens when eight percent of your market sort of goes over the edge of a cliff? How do you make up for that eight percent of sales? Is it going to be through independent booksellers? Is it going to be shifting over to the digital marketplace that is already starting to emerge? That, I think, is something that everybody's going to be grappling with tremendously in the next 12 months.



Beyond the Book

A Podcast Series on the Business of Writing and Publishing

KENNEALLY: Well, it's a great way to focus peoples' attention and I think it's certainly done that.

We've been chatting with Ron Hogan, a contributor to Shelf Awareness and the proprietor of Beatrice.com while attending Tools of Change here in New York City. For all of us at Copyright Clearance Center, this is Chris Kenneally saying, see you in the classroom and looking forward to more at beyondthebook.com.

END OF PODCAST