

The brave new world of free fiction

ONLINE: Why are writers giving away digital versions of their books on the Web?



Peter Darbyshire

READ THIS!

The hottest literary news of the year isn't Harry Potter or Oprah. It's not even the ongoing love/hate relationship between publishers and Google.

No, the hottest literary news of the year is something most readers haven't even heard of. Yet. It's the sudden surge of writers giving away their books for free online. Not unpublished books by wannabe writers, but published, critically acclaimed books by award-winning writers.

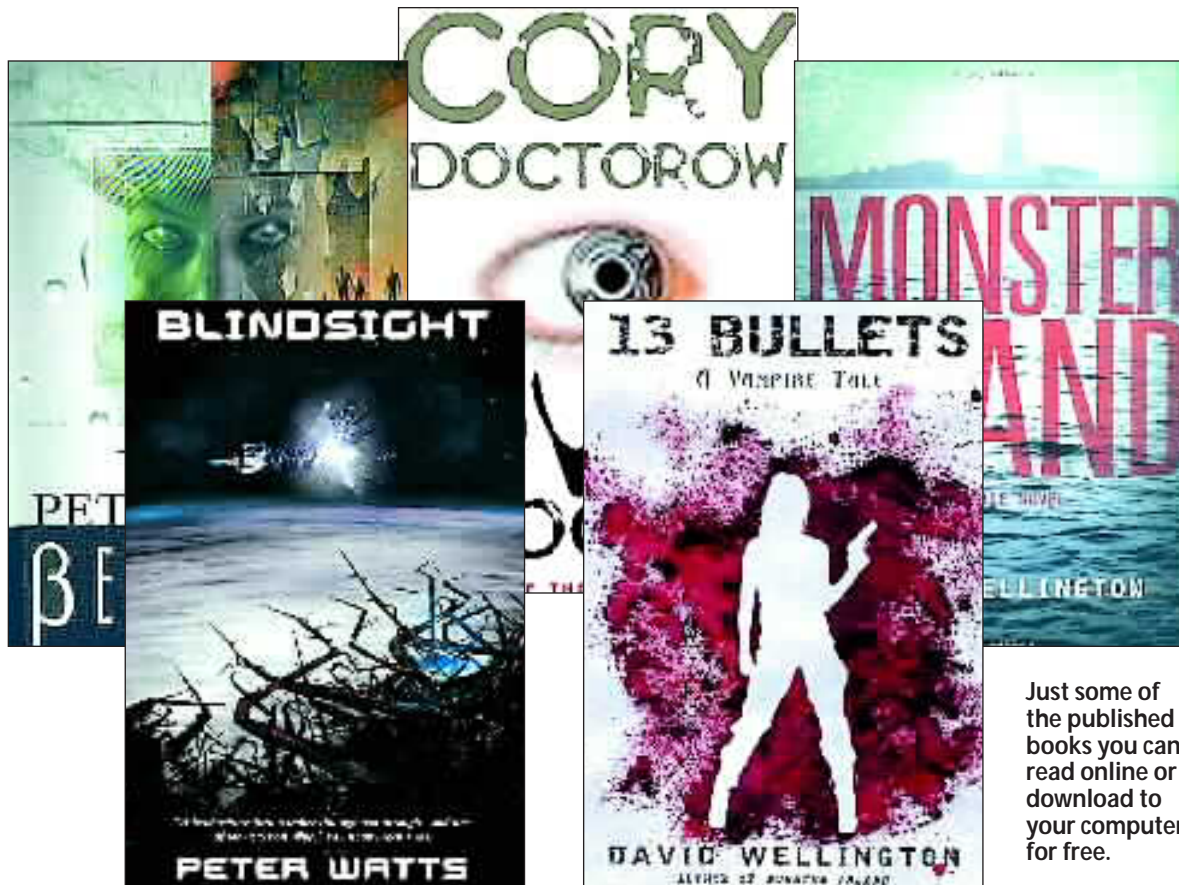
The trend began a few years ago with Cory Doctorow, a Canadian globetrotter and co-editor of one of the world's most popular websites, BoingBoing.net. Doctorow publishes his novels and short-story collections with Tor and other large publishing houses, but he also offers the books for free download on his personal website, www.craphound.com, in text, PDF and audio files, as well as any other digital format you can think of.

Doctorow assumes he loses a few sales of the print versions of his books by offering such freebies, but he figures he makes more in the long run by all the attention his work gets from being easily accessed and passed around online.

It's an assumption that's backed up by the experiences of other writers. Canada's Peter Watts recently released his latest book, *Blindsight*, a tale of humanity's first contact with aliens, to tepid sales. The book had an initial print run of 3,700 copies, and there were no plans for more.

The lack of enthusiasm for the book could have been explained by the book's dark subject matter — the cast of characters includes a vampire, a schizophrenic linguist and a narrator incapable of empathy, as well as some truly alien aliens, and the plot itself relies heavily on biology and linguistics.

But after Watts released *Blindsight* for free online, sales skyrocketed and



Just some of the published books you can read online or download to your computer for free.

rave reviews flooded the Internet. The book has since gone into multiple printings and been nominated for prestigious awards, including the Hugo award.

Watts points out that giving away *Blindsight* online was partially an act of necessity, as one of the larger bookstore chains in the U.S. had elected not to carry the book.

"In response, my publisher had committed to a miniscule print run," he says. "Normally in these cases you'd just assume you'd written a crappy book, or at least a noncommercial one, and move on — and yet, the advance reviews for *Blindsight* had been ecstatic unto orgasm."

So there was a lot of buzz, but the book itself was hard to find, which is why Watts posted it online (www.rifters.com/real/shorts.htm).

"I figured I was faced with a choice between a book which tanked commercially and nobody read, or a book that tanked commercially but which everyone could read for free," he says.

"Having the typical novelist's ego, I figured I'd take a shot at fame if I couldn't have the money. I posted

the whole thing online in both PDF and HTML formats, and held my breath."

Not only was the move a commercial success for Watts and his publisher, Tor, it also gave him an entirely new audience of readers.

"It turns out I have fans in Russia, South America, Romania, all sorts of places where the dead-tree edition would never have shipped," he says. "And a small but nontrivial fraction of these folks leave anywhere from \$5 to \$50 in my [online] tip jar, even though they're under absolutely no obligation to do so. The smallest donation I've ever received is significantly more than what I'd take home from the sale of one traditional copy. So I'm not complaining."

Watts also uses his website to flesh out his books and provide supplementary material they can't contain: "the 'classified' memos, the surveillance footage of secret underwater installations . . . these are all exclusively online peeks into the world behind the novels, and while they tie in to conventional dead-tree books they obviously can only exist in an online environment."

The positive reaction to Watts' release of *Blindsight* for free has also rejuvenated him as a writer.

"I got so disillusioned with the whole industry during *Blindsight* that I actually swore off writing entirely," he says. "But I'm sketching out three book-length projects at the moment: a sidequel to *Blindsight*, a series of interconnected stories that might best be described as a cross between [Joe Haldeman's sci-fi classic] *The Forever War* and *Bob the Builder* as written by H.P. Lovecraft; and a coffee-table book detailing the proceedings of the First Biennial Conference on the Biology and Evolution of Vampires. I've also been approached by a few publishers who are interested in short stories, so I should probably get started on those."

Some writers are using the tactic of giving away free books online for more than publicity purposes. American writer David Wellington actually wound up with a book deal when he posted his first book, *Monster Island*, about zombies overrunning Manhattan, on a friend's blog.

"I researched, plotted, and composed *Monster Island* as I went

along, publishing a chapter every Monday, Wednesday and Friday," Wellington says. "I didn't expect much of a response and at first I wasn't surprised. Then people started posting comments to the chapters. A lot of people — by the end of the book I had thousands of people reading it . . . A fan of the book recommended it to a publisher, who bought up the book and two sequels on the spot! I felt like I'd won the lottery. I'd been trying so hard to get published for so many years and when I finally decided to go in another direction — that was when it happened."

Not only did the online community help Wellington get the book deal, it also helps him write his books now. He's since written two sequels to *Monster Island*, *Monster Nation* and *Monster Planet*, as well as novels featuring other supernatural creatures — *Frostbite*, which features werewolves in the Canadian north, and *13 Bullets*, which has just been released in print form and tells the tale of a battle between a pair of cops and some truly nasty vampires.

Wellington uses the comments about the books he posts online to rewrite them for the print versions: "The ending to *Monster Planet* is completely different in the book. I add chapters if the original felt rushed."

Wellington also offers special incentives to readers to buy the print versions. "People who have already read the book online deserve something new, so I usually offer a free short story or something to anyone who buys the paperback," he says.

Like Watts, Wellington has also found audiences online that he probably wouldn't be able to reach otherwise.

"I have fans all over the world, thanks to the Internet," he says. "*Monster Island* has seen print in Germany, Italy and the UK, as well as North America. I get e-mail from people in Australia and Japan and South America as well because they've read the book online. I absolutely love it when someone writes me to say they live in Africa and they enjoyed my books. How many American genre writers ever get read in Africa? It still blows me away."

■ For more comments from Watts and Wellington, go to my blog on *The Province* website.

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