

# ▶▶ CHAPTER 1.

## The book is dead

*Le Roi est mort. Vive le Roi!*

It seems that the book is always about to die. In the last hundred years, the movies, radio, television and the internet have all been drafted as the book's willing executioner. Every few months something emerges to challenge its very existence. In response to the threat, some learned literary figure will pen a thousand word op-ed piece for a newspaper of record in the book's defence and categorically deny rumors of its impending death. Google's stated aim to digitise the known universe has triggered the most recent notices for the imminent demise of the book. In this case, *Wired* magazine's Kevin Kelly fired the first shots<sup>1</sup> and John Updike returned fire in a passionate exchange.<sup>2</sup> This time, both sides are too late. The fact is that the book is already dead.

It doesn't take a genius to see that books no longer sit at the centre of our culture. Our everyday thinking is largely shaped by other media products ranging from television, film, magazines, newspapers, music and the newest electronic bogeymen: videogames and the internet. The book has become a peripheral, a literary fashion accessory for the few who join book clubs or go to writers' festivals. Both anecdotally and statistically, no-one reads books anymore. Look around next time you're on a bus or train and count how many books are being read. Compare that number with the tally of (mostly white) headphones dangling out of ears. Or if you're in a large city, indulge in a little real estate porn and visit a few open houses. Whilst you're sticky-beaking, count the books, and make a note of whether they're

lying open on coffee tables, or sitting dog-eared on shelves. Both exercises confirm what the surveys tell us: people aren't reading books. Then visit your local bookstore. If you don't have one, you're not alone. Bookselling is being concentrated into the megamall experience. Two years ago, there were two independent bookshops in my local shopping area. Today there are none. And it seems that every time you turn around, another small publisher has gone bankrupt, or been amalgamated into a bigger multinational concern.

But wait, counter the book-lovers. More books are being published than ever before. Whilst smaller bookshops might be closing, you can buy books in more places; supermarkets, chainstores, even on the internet. And those big bookstores are vast, offering more miles of bookshelves than ever before. All of this might be true. But the book is still dead.

Apart from its relegation to the cultural sidelines, it is dead because most books published and sold are more 'anti-book' than book. There may be more titles available in the closest Borders store; there may be books in between the confectionary aisles of every supermarket in the country. But they are books *in name only*. The vast majority of books do not speak to the 500-year history of book publishing; they are not part of what might be called *book culture*; a culture centred on *ideas* and furthering the human conversation.

We still have objects called books. We still have businesses that publish and sell those objects. But the unique value that books contribute to our essential humanity has been increasingly diluted. Despite its age and traditions, book publishing is not mass media; nothing is more niche than solitary authors expounding on the topic of their own pet cactuses. And in the last 30 years or so of trying to become a hit-driven mass-media form, the book industry has killed the book. Take a stroll around your local megastore. Avoid the coffee shop and the DVD section. Move past the mp3 players and reading lights. Take away the ghost-

written sports autobiographies, ignore the celebrity cookbooks and cynical movie tie-ins. Bin the self-help books (*Everything you need to know about books you learnt when your house burnt down whilst you were changing the colo(u)r of your parachute*) and the cash register stocking fillers. What's left? Not a lot.

Some time in the last half of the twentieth century the business of books changed. The intellectual butterflies of the publishing industry devolved, not into caterpillars but slugs, as they were absorbed borg-like by multinational corporations intent on taking an industry that traded on *ideas*, into one which traded in those ideas on some fast-buck shifting of product. Books became yet another victim of the apparent need to redefine return on investment in terms of purely short-term monetary gain. For whatever reason, we have decided that books (like universities) now have to pay their own way and do so in a very short period of time. The idea of public good has been largely cast aside as the zaniness of soft-headed hippies from a bygone era.

Consider this. The process of producing books demands a real investment of resources. Making books is expensive. As is selling them. By contrast, writing books is comparatively cheap, demanding few resources beyond the time of a committed author, many of whom write for reasons other than money. This tension has a couple of consequences. Firstly, the book trade has always sat on the cusp of culture and commerce, as what Laura Miller calls 'reluctant capitalists';<sup>3</sup> it has traditionally been peopled by a balance of those who were conscious of their role in the remaking of cultures and others who understood that books were a *business* and that success was about getting the culture/commerce balance correct.

Secondly, books have long been shaped by time, and getting the aforementioned balance correct has largely been about taking time to do things the right way. It used to be understood that books were a craft, and required sustained effort. It was expected that authors had to be supported and nurtured and

worthwhile ideas sometimes took years to emerge; ideas which, once formed, had to stand the test of hindsight. Moreover, the culture was one where literary genius was measured in longevity; where a publisher's backlist – books that often were written decades ago – was their most valuable asset, and a canonical list of classics existed based on that longevity.

But the book's relationship to time has altered dramatically in the last few decades. As befits the modern publisher's reinvention as a small part of one of a few global multimedia enterprises, time is no longer privileged. Publishers are under increasing pressure to turn out new titles. New authors are given very little opportunity to sell and warehouses do not hold extensive backlists. Part of the change is a reflection of modern social and economic activity; speed is the new mantra, and the book trade is not immune to the pressures of quarterly financial reporting and weekly sales figures.

## ▶▶ New technology and all that

Most discussions about the death of the book suggest that new technologies will deliver the requisite death blow. The age of print, said Marshall McLuhan,<sup>4</sup> will give way to an electronic one. And tech-pundit after tech-pundit has promised that radio, television, CD-ROMs or the internet will kill the book. They were all right, but in an unexpected way.

Electronic media did not slay the book by replacing it. Whilst there has been displacement, and the tome is now just one of many media options, something more subtle and complicated happened. In trying to preserve the printed form of the book, the book trade was happy to change its contents to suit the shifting publishing environment. In order to save the object, the book was changed into something else entirely. Electronic media killed the book by forcing book publishers to adapt to the faster pace of information flows; to evolve into something more appropriate for the E! generation. Printed books have become

more like television shows; the need for speed and instant gratification has resulted in the anti-book object that dominates today's book trade. Books are now designed to capitalise on particular moments; to leverage off other media assets; to profit from corporate synergies; to buy into the five minutes of fame demanded of modern celebrity culture; and to pander to the get-rich-quick schemes that pass for self-help. And books themselves reflect this cultural shift, with shorter chapters, fewer words, splashier graphics and absolutely no ideas. What's more, these books are now given only a few months to be successful before they are yanked off the shelves.

You could probably mark the beginning of the end with the invention of the telegraph; the moment when information began to move more quickly than goods. Since then, the book has found breathing more difficult. Follow its long slow demise through to the concentration of global multimedia empires in the late twentieth century, where it struggles on, choking for air.<sup>5</sup> But to suggest that the book has run out of oxygen solely because of technological change is too determinist.

In fact, *new technologies will save book culture*. Computer-based communications, social networks and newly de-institutionalised creativity can play a role in re-privileging the *idea* of ideas. The essence of the book can be captured and distilled from its material form; the new technologies can form the basis for a reinvigoration and a reinvention of book culture. Rather than cling desperately to the old ways, we should embrace the opportunities presented by the new.

The *object* of the book is the problem. Whilst it's easy to blame Nielsen Bookscan,<sup>6</sup> part of the change can be attributed to the limitations of the physical form of the book. The act of printing, binding, shipping and storing paper bundles around the planet is anachronistic. The time and resources that could be spent ensuring that a book culture continues is wasted on creating objects; cultivating trees instead of ideas. The constraints

caused by having to *print books* impedes the potential inherent in writing and publishing them. Modern publishing is not about shifting ideas, it's about shifting objects.

And it often appears that the content is relevant only insofar as making the object appealing enough to sell. Publishers' concerns centre around the cover and the blurb; about making the object (or container) sufficiently appealing that someone will pick it up and buy it. Tom Dyckhoff, writing in the *Guardian*, sums up the game at hand:

Publishers have just a few seconds to catch your eye, as you promiscuously scan the shop floor. Let your eye rest for a second, and they've almost got you. Make contact, read the blurb on the back and, most importantly today, clock the face of the author.<sup>7</sup>

The book is dead because the book trade is about selling objects, not ideas.

## ▶▶ Books don't matter

Of course, a *book* called 'The Book is Dead' is an absurd proposition. The very fact that you are holding it in your hands suggests that its central premise is flawed. Or that it's an example of the worst excesses of the age: a cheap (so-called) post-ironic statement designed by the marketing department of a struggling book publishing company. Which is, of course, what it is. Apart from the bit about my publisher being a struggling company. And maybe this book is postmodern, not in any cynical marketing way, but because it is 'a map preceding the territory', and its self-referential character must be excused because its fate as a book might demonstrate the truth of its title. That the book is dead.

Think about this. This book was commissioned in late 2005 and written during the course of 2006. Although it wasn't the only thing I did that year, the book did take up an awful lot of my

‘brain space’, and whether I was jotting down ideas, reflecting on some observations, chatting to like-minded people or actually typing words on my computer, it was my major project of 2006. When I first talked to my publisher, we threw around some potential sales figures. With any luck, she said, it will sell 3000 copies. That’s it. It’ll make my publisher a little money and somewhat less for me. Maybe enough for a new stove, we joked. But like most authors, money wasn’t the motivating factor. Being an academic, I’m more interested in ideas. And if my luck holds, the concepts contained in these pages will be read by a few thousand people; one or two of whom might actually engage further in a conversation about the future of books.

Of course this is more people than read my doctoral thesis (a grand total of four) or most journal articles, but it’s still not a lot. Even in academia. To put it into some perspective, I regularly lecture to classes of several hundred undergraduates. Granted, most of them probably pay no heed to what I’m saying, but who knows what proportion of my buyers will be readers, or will read this book *all the way through*. No matter how hard you spin it, this book is a mere blip, a few thousand readers is miniscule. And it’s probably no different from many others that have been published. Some American statistics: in 2004, only 10 book titles sold more than a million copies. Fewer than 1500 sold more than 50000 copies. Sixty-seven thousand titles sold between 1000 to 5000 and most books published sold fewer than 99 copies.<sup>8</sup> Most books have almost zero cultural impact. They simply don’t matter to most people.

Of course, *some* books do have a much larger impact. The most popular books manage to shape contemporary culture for a few minutes. Some are even made into Hollywood blockbusters. And a handful become book to film to videogame multimedia empires. The majority of those are seldom what the Saturday supplements call literary. And the idea that an ‘intellectual’ book will be a mega-seller is normally just silly. There are exceptions

that prove the rule; some bestsellers are not airport-bookshop-blockbusters. For example, over nine million copies of Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time* are in print.<sup>9</sup> Even I have a copy on my bookshelves where it sits ready to impress visitors. But I have no idea what it's about because I haven't read it. In fact, I've only met one person who has read *any* Hawking book from cover to cover, and he works for NASA. A lot of people know of Stephen Hawking from his appearance on *The Simpsons* rather than from anything he's written. Maybe a book's impact on the wider cultural fabric is some kind of trickle-down effect; a series of 'Chinese whispers' emanating from the few who have read the book to the many who like to say they have. Those who don't bother with the book and just read the reviews. Tom Townsend, a character in Whit Stillman's 1990 film *Metropolitan* sums it up:

I don't read novels. I prefer good literary criticism. That way you get both the novelists' ideas as well as the critics' thinking.<sup>10</sup>

## ▶▶ Does anybody still read books?

Most people don't read books. A much-cited US National Endowment for the Arts survey<sup>11</sup> from a couple of years ago confirms that there is a downward trend in reading books of any kind. For too many people, reading books is associated with school, or work of some kind; it is a chore rather than a pleasure. It probably begins differently. Middle class kids are encouraged by schemes such as the Premier's Reading Challenge and Children's Book Week. All the 'how-to-bring-up-kids' gurus declare that parents should read three books to their kids every night before bedtime. But reading appears to become less important as children get older. My extended family is a statistically insignificant case in point. My kids are four and five and love their books. The brightly coloured pictures and simple rhymes of childhood favourites make bedtime a treat for the four year old, and the older child is busy trying to sound out new

words as she works through her home readers. On the other hand, I have several nephews. The seven year old still reads; mainly *Scooby Doo* stories, but more recently football magazines. He spends more time watching cartoons. His cousins are 10 and 13. The 10 year old plays Xbox incessantly and never goes anywhere without his Game Boy. His brother has a *World of Warcraft* account and dips into the virtual at every opportunity.

Interestingly, all of these children are surrounded by books. We regularly give books as birthday and Christmas presents, and the entire adult family is one of book readers. Of course, kids seem to obsess fanatically for short periods of their lives. It wouldn't surprise us if one of the boys devoured the *Lemony Snicket* series over one summer holiday. But even if he does, books aren't the focus of childhood leisure time. On top of the childhood activities of my day, a plethora of media and play opportunities now exist. I may have mucked about with bicycles and watched television when I was young, but I didn't surf the web when I was five. Both my kids already do; clicking links with a mouse as naturally as they turn the pages of a book. As children get older, the distractions become even more plentiful and squeezing books into the demands of adult life is not a choice that many seem to make.

The industry responds with the claim that book sales are still healthy; that more book titles are being published than ever before. And that blockbusters keep selling in the millions. If the book is dead, they argue, what about Dan Brown and JK Rowling? But take away the superstar authors and the numbers trail to literally nothing. In Australia, the tenth biggest selling paperback of 2005 sold 'over 55 000 copies'.<sup>12</sup> Which seems like quite a few until you realise that the same number of people will sit in the rain at the Melbourne Cricket Ground watching *one* football game. And they'll do it every Saturday in winter.<sup>13</sup> Or that in order to make the top 10 television shows on any given night, over a *million* people need to be watching.<sup>14</sup> And in case

you're wondering, the Australian data is pretty similar to the overseas experience. In 2002, Alice Sebold's novel *The Lovely Bones* was a mega-hit, selling 1.5 million copies. That same year, Fox debuted the television series *Skin* which attracted four times that number of viewers, but was considered a dismal failure and cancelled.<sup>15</sup> Without entering into the debate about the accuracy of television ratings numbers, it's clear that books and television occupy completely different realities when it comes to audiences.

Patently, reading books is a niche activity, something we'll discuss more in Chapter 3. However the demise of the book should not be confused with the death of reading. Despite declining sales, people *are* still reading newspapers and magazines. Even those pimply teenage boys are reading walk-through guides for their PlayStation games. And the web is (despite temporary video phenomena such as YouTube) a largely text-driven place. So people are reading websites, blogs and chats. Reading (and writing) are still part of everything we do. At which point, booklovers are known to get defensive and start to mutter unkind things about 'the internet'. Books will be around forever, they say. And they roll out the usual arguments about cost, convenience, portability, the ease of reading ink on paper instead of a flickering screen and the evil panopticon that is the world wide web.<sup>16</sup> Despite their protestations, the book is dead. The bottom line is that there are now better ways of reaching an audience than publishing a book in the old-fashioned way. Perhaps we need to think about publishing books in a new-fashioned way.

## ▶▶ In the beginning

Johannes Gutenberg's use of movable type made mass produced printing feasible and revolutionised book publishing. He was voted Man of the Millennium<sup>17</sup> for this feat, which many claim changed the world. Within 30 years, Europe went from a continent

starved of reading material to one ‘peppered with around nine million books’.<sup>18</sup> The accepted wisdom is that the book greatly contributed to (amongst other things), the Enlightenment, the Renaissance and the creation of modern science.<sup>19</sup> Pedants (and the more culturally sensitive) might point to the Chinese invention of movable type 300 years earlier,<sup>20</sup> but it’s undeniable that western literary tradition and culture owes a more direct debt to Gutenberg than Pi Sheng. Gutenberg worked in Mainz on the Rhine River in Germany, about midway between Frankfurt and Koblenz. I visited nearly two decades ago as part of a gap-year ramble around the planet, and it didn’t make much of an impact. All I remember is that it was raining and I sought shelter in the Gutenberg Museum where I spent some time out of the drizzle looking at a copy of his eponymous bible.

What struck me about the *Gutenberg Bible* is how similar and how different it is to a modern book. It’s instantly recognisable as a book; printed on paper pages, bound into a single object and read in a way familiar to us all. It was also singularly different from the copy of *Let’s Go Europe* that I was lugging around at the time. Look closely at the *Gutenberg Bible*, and the style of the text is reminiscent of a hand-copied manuscript. And whilst the words and lines were printed, each copy was individually coloured by artists, making it unique. In many ways, the *Gutenberg Bible* is like most examples of transient technologies. It is a hybrid; a combination of the old and the new, in which a new technique is used to recreate the look and feel of an older media form. What’s more, only 180 copies were printed. At the time, it was an unheard of number, but it’s a long way from the massive print runs publishers require today. Consistent with this miniscule print run and in another parallel to today’s publishing world, Gutenberg apparently made no money from his bibles.

Books have obviously changed a lot since Gutenberg’s time. Printing and binding techniques improved, distribution channels became far more efficient and an entire industry

sprung up around the book ‘object’ of the codex. And the book as object continues to change. The bound codex of the early twenty-first century is not that of a hundred years ago. *The Da Vinci Code Special Illustrated Edition* (paperback), with its combination of text and graphics, interplay between fiction and non-fiction and marketing-driven format would have been unimaginable in an era of fragile cloth-bound hard-cover books. The nineteenth-century reader would be confronted by graphic design, manifest in new typefaces and striking covers matched with totally unheard of visual and textual arrangement. In the last hundred years, we have seen the invention of the paperback, the various trade formats and comic books. Notwithstanding the differences evident in today’s books, pick up an old book and place it next to a new one and the disparity is enormous. All of which suggests that the object of the book is not fixed and *has always been evolving*.

The sheer heft of old volumes has given way to paperbacks as people demanded portability, or found other ways of reading that better suit their requirements. Some now find that even the paperback is too physically constraining. On the Lonely Planet discussion forums, responding to ‘what one book would you take travelling?’, ‘pq’ suggests: ‘Download some talking books onto your iPod and take as much as you want. Books are just too heavy.’<sup>21</sup> For pq, there is no suggestion that an audiobook is anything other than a book. It is merely the most obvious solution to a problem of portability that every traveller has experienced. Some read on their smartphones:

For me, it’s primarily about availability of the device – I hate carrying around stuff. I have a treo 600 that’s taken over a great deal of my PC tasks. I never started reading e-books until I got it ... Anyway, I’ve done so much reading with the treo (wherever I find myself waiting I can read) and gotten used to the convenience of not turning pages, having my place saved automatically in multiple books, having a backlight

so that ambient lighting is irrelevant, having all the books I've read on the device present for reference and electronic searches, that I have a hard time picking up a paper book now.<sup>22</sup>

Both these readers understand that they are still reading books. But for them, the object has evolved into one that no longer involves print on paper. Whilst such readers are currently in the minority, they represent a possible future for the book; one in which the object is allowed to evolve into something quite different.

## ▶▶ What is a book meant to do?

Ask most people to define a book, and they would look at you as if you were stupid. 'It's obvious,' they would say, speaking slowly. 'A book is something that you read. It's a collection of bound paper pages containing useful or entertaining text.' But the obvious doesn't always reflect the complexity of reality. A book is *not* just that thing in your hands. If we allow books to be defined solely by their material form, we miss the point. We need to think about what books are *meant to do* and be open minded enough to consider whether the object is still required.

The telephone makes a terrific analogy. Thirty years ago the telephone in my parent's living room was a large, heavy beige plastic device with a rotary dial. It was fixed, located in a specific room in a house. Telephone calls were made from one location to another and the device was only capable of allowing a synchronous voice conversation to occur between two people. Think about what the telephone was *meant to do* 30 years ago. Most countries recognised the public service value in a national telephone network and instituted universal service obligations which required telephone companies to deliver their service to the entire population at a reasonable cost. The telephone infrastructure was usually run by a national monopoly, reflecting the importance of the phone network. Cross-subsidies were

commonplace, and as a result, so-called local calls cost very little, or were free.

Today, what we call a telephone is a tiny pocket-sized device that is linked to a *person* not a *place*. As well as allowing us to speak to each other, phones transmit text, pictures and video messages. More often than not, they also play videos and music, surf the web and annoy those around you with downloadable ringtones. The company behind the phone and its infrastructure are probably stockmarket darlings trying to make big bucks in a competitive marketplace. Think about what a telephone is *meant to do* today, and affordable local calls in the national interest would not be very high on the agenda. Timed local calls, high costs between networks (particularly with mobile telephony) and a switch in priority which has seen telephone companies focus on more profitable services has killed that old fashioned idea of the telephone. In short, there are still devices called telephones and they can still be used for voice conversations over a distance. But the telephone, as we knew it, is dead. Ironically, voice-on-ip services (such as Skype) which build on internet connected personal computers have become the mechanism for that old idea of a telephone to re-emerge, allowing cheap location-to-location calling on devices that currently don't look much like the telephones of yesteryear.

The book is the same. Cultural habits and motivations have changed. The production process is dramatically different, as are the corporations involved and the values embedded in that process. The book you hold in your hand is less likely to speak to ideas of a book culture than a superficially similar one produced 50 years ago. Today, books are vehicles for cross-promotion of high-profile multimedia products. They are branded, manufactured entities whose purpose is to leverage the synergies that exist in global corporations. Think *Harry Potter* and his miscellaneous wizardry paraphernalia. Or any other successful franchise. And ask the question: 'Is *this* what books are meant to do?' Just as

voice-on-ip does telephony better than telephones, maybe there are better ways of doing books.

So why bother writing or publishing a book now? Because this is a time of opportunity, as well as crisis. The book as we know it may be dead, but just as a king's demise often leads to a renewed kingdom, acknowledging the book's death is the first step in its rebirth. Then we can remember that it's *what books do* that is important, not *what they are*. Writing a book entitled *The Book is Dead* creates a delicious irony, but hopefully this merely marks the beginning of a longer conversation. One which will take place in any number of public forums. That the book is dead should not be cause for commiseration. Rather, we should celebrate what books *can do* and embrace the emerging opportunities. This printed book may only be read by 1000 people. Its contents might wither and die at the end of a particular branch of publishing history. And in doing so, its central premise will be fulfilled. Or the ideas in this book may resonate and take a life of their own; they may be discussed and debated in a hundred new forums, spreading the conversation about books far and wide. The object that is this book will be forgotten, even as its ideas take a life of their own.

In many ways, this book is a plea for what's *inside* books to become more valued. And if that means that new ways of spreading the word, new engagements with the text are required, then so be it. We need to salvage the book's essential organs by discarding the decaying body. The book's heart will beat more strongly elsewhere. After all, words still matter, they continue to shape who we are as people and define what is important to us. Many people still read and write, pause and reflect, engage with the fabric of human existence via words and images in ways that printed books have done for centuries. Only now, the most vibrant ideas, the most scintillating conversations, the very essence of *book culture* has migrated elsewhere. Away from the traditional publishers and booksellers. And into other hands and other spaces.

The media technologies that have put downloaded talking books on pq's iPod are important for other reasons. They enable entirely new ways of engaging with content. Like it or not, readers are becoming writers. The imagined human conversation that used to take place *between the books* is now something everyone can see. And participate in. As in many other realms, the internet is making the invisible visible. Where once authors were blind to the reaction that a book might provoke (apart from in the minds of a few published critics, and the odd festival crowd), today they can expose their frail egos to a virtual battering and easily continue the conversation that their books begin. Which begs the questions: 'Why not just create a website, or a blog and write in that space? Isn't a blog a more accessible, convenient, and timely replacement for a book on any particular topic? Aren't boingboing.net or fark.com better ways to express the quirky entirety of popular culture than any printed artefact on the same theme?'

Despite the title of this tome, I think not, and we'll examine why in more detail later. Whilst the book as an object is dead, its place in the cultural milieu is essential and must be protected. There are things that books can do, characteristics that they possess, conversations that they allow that must be preserved. In the same breath that I call the book dead, I make a plea to hold onto the essence of *what a book should do*. Having cast aside the notion that the book is an object, the next step is to identify exactly what a book is. Cultural theorists<sup>23</sup> reckon that the hardest part about analysing a cultural object is defining it. And that's what I'll do in the next chapter.