

Book Reviews



The Future of the Book. Ed. Geoffrey Nunberg. Berkeley: Univ. of California Pr., 1996. 306p. \$45 cloth, ISBN 0-520-20450-6; \$14.95 paper, ISBN 0-520-20451-4. LC 95-45441.

I suspect that many librarians share a tragic sense of living at the end of an age. No doubt the new millennium will usher in marvelous things, but at the cost of the culture of the book and of libraries as we know them. *The Future of the Book* illuminates, and to some extent allays, this anxiety. It is a collection of eleven essays based on papers presented at a conference held in July 1994 at the Center for Semiotic and Cognitive Studies of the University of San Marino. The conference explored social and cultural meanings of the book and of writing, not only in the hypothetical future, but also in the past and present. An introduction by Geoffrey Nunberg and an afterword by Umberto Eco help integrate the original papers. Even without these summaries, however, the essays would hold together pretty well. The same themes appear again and again, seen from different angles, through different conceptual lenses, and under different historical circumstances.

In order to think about the future of the book, one has to render strange the concept of the book and—more surprisingly, perhaps—the concept of the future. These papers historicize the book as object and cultural process, as well as technology. The cultural impact of digital communication is often compared to the advent of the printed book, the so-called Gutenberg revolution. But this was not the only, or necessarily the most important, historical watershed. What about the invention of writing itself, which threatened to replace oral forms of cultural transmission, or the

replacement of the scroll with the codex, which permitted “random access” to text? James J. O’Donnell (“The Pragmatics of the New: Trithemius, McLuhan, Cassiodorus”) identifies three periods of crisis: (1) late antiquity, when the authority of written texts was established; (2) the fifteenth century, a period of considerable resistance to printed books; and (3) the age of Marshall McLuhan’s prophecies about the medium and the message. Carla Hess (“Books in Time”) uses examples from eighteenth-century France to prove that modern literary culture was not the inevitable result of the invention of printing but, rather, the consequence of social and political choices. Paul Duguid, in one of the most theoretically exciting papers in the book (“Material Matters: The Past and Futurology of the Book”), points to accounting systems as an early version of hypertext. What we see in the present, and foresee for the future, has already existed in the past, at least embryonically.

The question of the future of the book is often phrased in dualistic, either/or terms. But as several authors in this collection point out, the famous statement of the archdeacon in Victor Hugo’s *Hunchback of Notre Dame* that “*Ceci tuera cela*” (“this will kill that”) is not applicable in this case. Digital technology need not kill the book. As a matter of fact, digitization makes book publishing easier. But if this particular dichotomy is discredited, others take its place: temporal/spatial, sociocultural/technological, publishing/communication, natural/arbitrary signs. Semiotic analysis uses such theoretical oppositions to reveal new meaning in familiar matters.

Many of these essays are pleasur-

able to read in themselves, quite apart from any relevance they may have for librarianship. Inspired by Jean-Paul Sartre's *The Words*, Régis Debray ("The Book As Symbolic Object") offers a poetic evocation of the book as fetish, as stone, as architecture, as religious object. Raffaele Simone ("The Body of the Text") shows how texts (not books) can be thought of as closed and autonomous, or open and permeable. And who could resist Umberto Eco's reassuring, grandfatherly, utterly lucid summing up? Why do we have to choose between visual and alphabetic cultures? he asks. Why not improve both? Fewer books would be a good thing; too many are published already. We can have both publishing and communicating, closed texts and open systems. Eco's sense of humor is a tonic. He jokes about a "culture in which there will be no books, and yet where people go around with tons and tons of unbound sheets of paper. This will be quite unwieldy, and will pose a new problem for libraries."

Although a few of the other pieces in this book are less original, none seems dated. This may be because they have been revised for publication, or perhaps semioticians perceive patterns that are only beginning to emerge. Those who crave an answer to the literal question What is the future of the book? will be disappointed that these authors have no answer (in fact, they warn against attempts at long-range predictions about changing technology). They seem to be defining a world in which two or more cultures exist simultaneously, the culture of the book and something else. This divided consciousness will be recognized immediately by librarians as the mental world they already inhabit.—*Jean Alexander, Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois*

Issues in Collection Management: Librarians, Booksellers, Publishers. Ed. Murray S. Martin. Greenwich, Conn.: JAI Pr.

(Foundations in Library and Information Science, 31), 1995. 193p. \$78.50. ISBN 1-55938-608-8. LC 95-4503.

Most of the fourteen articles in this collection were first presented as papers at the 1991 Charleston Conference on Issues in Book and Serial Acquisitions. Although the focus of the volume is on academic libraries, issues such as shrinking budgets and new technologies are ones that all libraries face as they try to adapt to an ever-changing and complex environment. Volume editor and series coeditor Murray Martin states in his introduction that the purpose of this book is to provide all librarians with models that may help in dealing with today's problems.

The book is organized into four sections. The two lead articles comprising the first section approach long-standing library issues from a theoretical and philosophical perspective. In his provocative essay, Richard Abel, who has had many years of experience in library bookselling, explores the distinction between information and knowledge, and proposes changes for restoring their balance. He correlates information with the journal and knowledge with the book, and suggests that by restoring the ratio of materials budgets in favor of books, we will at least begin to solve some of the problems that have beset librarians for years.

Clifford Lynch, an expert in the area of library automation, explores the financial implications of shifting from printed to electronic reference sources. He suggests that improved reference services through the use of networked databases are likely to reduce individual purchases of both the print and electronic versions of these reference tools, and thus may create serious economic issues for not only libraries and publishers, but also the entire marketplace.

The remaining three sections consist of articles that identify a variety of issues related to collection management