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## The Reading Renaissance

By [TIMOTHY EGAN](#) | NY Times | The Opinionator

SEATTLE - Satan in Seattle, as the walking wounded of the book business describe Amazon.com, continues to expand from the shores of Lake Union here, with nearly a dozen new office buildings housing the global nerve center of earth's largest online retailer.

By contrast, a few miles away is lovely old Town Hall, a sanctuary for the written word. On any given night, hundreds of people show up to hear a novelist tell a story, a poet turn mush into sublime rhyme, an essayist make narrative sense of messy facts. Town Hall is one reason why the Northwest is known as a touring author's paradise.

We hear that one culture must destroy the other. It's inevitable: the books-to-the-barricades defenders of ideas printed on dead trees will lose all that they love to the soulless digital monolith on Lake Union, with its 164 million customers.

And, knife to the heart, the federal government has now filed antitrust action against Amazon's foes, which include some of the biggest New York publishers and their partner in digital wordselling, Apple.

But surprise: the apocalypse already came and went, and look who's standing. One technology, the e-book, the biggest new invention in reading since Gutenberg cranked out a Bible with movable type, changed the world - most likely for better. We have more books, more readers, a bigger audience for words, on pixels or paper.

The problem, for those who are purely reactive, is that publishing as we know it will soon die. And so will bookstores that are no more nimble or creative than a socks 'n' things in the mall.

I love independent bookstores - the feel, the smell, the randomness. Without the indies, much of America would be even more of a cultural desert. Thus, I was predisposed to believe that Amazon and e-books would drive small stores and paper books to the grave. But the numbers show otherwise.

There are two big questions about the future of books and technology. One is: are people reading more and, by implication, buying more books? The answer is yes. In their annual report last August, the Association of American Publishers reported that overall revenues, and number of books sold in all formats, were up sizably in three years since 2008. Without e-books, the numbers would have been flat, or declined.

One-fifth of all American adults reported reading an e-book in the past year, according to an [optimistic report from the Pew Center](#). And those digital consumers read far more books on average - about 24 a year - than the dead-tree consumers.

Another surprise: e-book readers also buy lots of paper books. The buyers of digital tomes "read more books in all formats," Pew reported. By 2025, e-books will be 75 percent of total books sold, in Pew's forecast. I know it's hard for publishing to accept, but this is good news, given the voracious buying habits of the e-book reader.

Well then, what about the second question: the fate of the independent bookstores, those imperiled isles of words? The headline from a release by the American Booksellers Association during last year's holiday buying season was telling: "Indies Defy Conventional Wisdom as Sales and Locations Continue to Increase." The release quoted Oren Teicher, head of the association, as saying, "An array of factors are fueling the resurgence of independent bookstores." Among those factors are sales of e-books by indies.

Of course, some terrific bookstores are still on life support. If the market won't help them, they may need local subsidies, in the same way that cities support dance or music.

Which brings us back to Amazon. The publishing community is convinced that the Justice Department has gone after the wrong malefactor. Amazon, with its cheap pricing model, will ultimately drive everyone else out of business.

If that happens, and only Amazon is left standing, they should then be sued by the feds. But for now, all Amazon is doing is what any innovative company does: trying to gain an edge with the consumer, through pricing or product. By contrast, what the targets of the antitrust suit were doing, according to the complaint, was old-fashioned pricefixing.

I may live in Seattle, but I don't know Jeff Bezos, the Amazon founder and C.E.O., and I don't carry his water. When he describes his business as "a culture of metrics," it creeps me out. Metrics? What about Milton, Melville or Morrison?

If Amazon wasn't inventing the future, somebody else would. And Bezos makes a good point in his annual shareholder letter when he notes that the Amazon Kindle e-book list is full of self-published authors represented by small presses. Many of those writers would never get their shot, defying publishing's gatekeepers in New York, without the new format.

One author, A.K. Alexander, who wrote the thriller "Daddy's Home," says in Bezos's note that she made more royalties in a month on her Kindle sales than she did in a year with traditional publishing. Of course, Amazon sells the book for a fraction of a hardback's price, but they also cut out the pulping, the printing, the binding, the delivery truck. And remember, the big publishers also sell cheap when it suits them, with mass-market paperbacks going for prices well below e-books in some cases.

A few days ago I was in Portland, Ore., in a theater stuffed full of readers and writers at the annual Oregon Book Awards. The book community there is thriving, said Andrew Proctor, head of Literary Arts in Portland, with resurgent poetry slams and nonprofit

publishers finding big niche audiences. "Great works rise in unpredictable and unexpected places," Proctor told me, in an upbeat assessment of the literary world.

Publishers need to reinvent their own future. They could offer packages. They could partner more with communities of interest, from environmentalists to religious conservatives. And, most important, they could start believing in tomorrow, instead of being afraid of it.