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Interview with Scott Lindenbaum Electric Literature co-founder

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Q: We're in New York at MediaBistro's eBook Summit, wondering whether popular culture can ever find room for the literary in our lives. Talking to Scott Lindenbaum. He's the cofounder of Electric Literature and welcome to Beyond the Book, Scott.

A: Thanks, Chris.

Q: It's good to have you here because you said a couple of things that really made me sit up and listen closely, and that particular point about popular culture and literature, particularly the literary world itself, which is often thought of as living in an ivory tower. You want to bring them down from the ivory tower or maybe help people climb up into it. Talk about that.

A: Sure. I mean myself and my cofounder met in an MFA program and we both care very much about literature. It is unfortunate that recently literary fiction and short literary fiction in particular has really been relegated to university journals and other kind of distribution mediums that keep it away from popular culture. It stays in this kind of ivory tower, this very cloistered community and because of that, it's lost its footholds as an important cultural artifact in popular culture. One of the things we're trying to do with Electric Literature is find a new distribution model and a new payment system to kind of reintroduce literary fiction, particularly short literary fiction to popular culture, giving readers options as to how they want to read, while insuring that writers are still being paid for their work. If writers aren't paid in the future, writing won't continue to be a professional endeavor. It'll have to be relegated to a hobby or something only for the rich or the eclectic and that's just not acceptable to us. It's way too important and reflects way too much on the experience of being alive for literature to just go kind of crawl away and die in the university system.

Q: Well, that's pretty ambitious and let's talk about where the idea came from. You and your cofounder, who are both here today at the eBook Summit, Andy Hunter, met at Brooklyn College where you were MFA students and you worked on a review there that was founded by Allen Ginsberg.

A: Yeah, that's correct. Our first experience working together was on that Brooklyn review. That's what it was called, *The Brooklyn Review*. It came out annually. It's



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a good literary journal, put out in a university system, like you said. It stands on Allen Ginsberg's name very well, but what we found is at the end of the day, its distribution was very small. Just a couple hundred copies. Most of them sit in boxes in faculty offices and when we called distributors, we found that even the most popular literary journals, published in that traditional way, maybe only reach 30 or 40 stores across the country. We knew that we wanted to keep working together and to do something, but we knew that the only way we could continue to publish things and feel good about it would be to take all of these new tools that were becoming available to us, new media, digital distribution, print on demand services, and kind of somehow fuse them all together into a more elegant, innovative distribution system that would allow the kind of literature we feel is important to get back out to people.

We came up with the idea for Electric Literature, which is our publishing house and the anthology series is our flagship product, by having a look at what Apple was doing with the iTunes store, what Amazon was doing with the Kindle, and what nonproprietary ebook formats were kind of doing out in the ether there with the Sony Reader and various other ereaders. We thought someone should be offering a comprehensive model where what is written is available everywhere in all of these platforms and because literary readers are often married to the book as an object, we needed to find a way to get around the traditional printing cost of a literary magazine. So we took up a print on demand system, which means that every book that is bought is printed to order.

That means there's no print run, there's no publishing fees at the printer, there's no warehousing costs, there's no shipping. A traditional literary magazine with a print run of let's say 5,000 might have a \$5,000 printing bill upfront. With a fairly unpopular format, that may mean that they have no money left to pay their writers. What we do is we take that same amount of money we would have paid to the printer, we pay it out to our writers, \$1,000 a story for five stories. We pay our designer a small amount to format things into the various digital formats and what we then have is a much wider reach than a traditional literary magazine, in the thousands as opposed to the hundreds we experienced at *The Brooklyn Review*. We have writers who are paid for their work on par with a place like *The New Yorker* or any other top outlet for short fiction, and we have readers that can get it however they want it.

If they want a digital subscription, they go to electricliterature.com, they'll have it emailed to them in whatever format they choose, from EPUB, LRF, which is the Sony format, a MOBI file, which is compatible with the Kindle, PDF if they want to print it out or trade it on computers or whatever they like, or they can get their



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Q: What's interesting though, and I want to make sure that it's clear to our listeners, is that this is – you're keeping it away from the traditional web, if you will, and you made a point about saying that there had been a precedent set online very early that made content free, but that with the devices, there is an attempt by many publishers and authors too, to try to change that precedent, to make it a precedent for at least some payment. Now you're talking 99 cents here, we're not talking \$99 or anything, but still, that's a critical distinction. So I cannot go to the website and read these things. I have to place some kind of an order where it goes into my reader.

A: That's correct. As you noticed, the one format I didn't mention was online publishing. We do believe that the original sin of journalism was offering all of its content free online immediately to anyone who could go to the website. It's created a huge problem between the writers supplying the content and the publishers distributing it. That precedent was set, as you said, very, very early and we feel that it's not up to us to answer the question of whether or not there's a way to find – a way to revise that precedent, to make it so that people are willing to pay online. That's not what we're concerned about.

Q: You can't put that toothpaste back in the tube.

A: That's absolutely right. The toothpaste is out and it's everywhere. It's a mess. So instead, what we are seeing is an industry in transition. These new devices, new ways of reading. We want to get in there early, which we have of course, and try to set an example and set precedence now so that the literary publishing industry doesn't veer in that same direction. If we can keep it from veering in that direction, if we can show people that paying for content helps to keep content flowing towards them in a high quality, from great authors, helps to support those writers and keeps the whole ecosystem working now, then they will continue to pay for that content in the future and as you said, a digital addition of Electric Literature only costs \$4.99. That's 99 cents a story. If you subscribe, it's 20% less than that and if you really want the paperback, it's still under \$10. So we made sure to price that still under the average price of a paperback book.

Q: Well, now you guys have been in the media spotlight recently, not just for this new way of looking at the literary magazine, but for an experiment you did that, depending upon the perspective, either was successful or not. And that was to publish some fiction by Rick Moody, the author of *The Ice Storm*, as a Twitter feed. Tell us about that and at the end of it all, how do you feel how it went?



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A: Yeah, that was an incredible project. It happened about a week and a half ago on our Twitter account, which is @electriclit, as one word. Basically, we wanted to be the first publisher to commission a writer to construct a piece of literary fiction expressly for Twitter. Now a lot of people have written things for Twitter in the past. We certainly didn't invent Twitter fiction, but this would be the first time a literary author would be doing it and he'd be writing it for the 140 character constraint, which means that the story itself is broken up into 153 sections of 140 characters or less. Each section both standing alone as a kind of piece of poetry and kind of prose poetry and also telling a larger story. We had a good relationship with Rick for a long time. He said that this was something he had been thinking about.

We kind of pushed him, got a little wind in his sails, got him to write the thing, and then decided that we would of course tweet it and we tweeted it – each tweet came out every ten minutes for about three days. It was a micro serialization, if you will. What we then decided to do, and this is where the controversy came in, was we decided to get – in the spirit of community and to expand the reach, which is really the mission of Electric Literature before anything else, we decided to get other literary publishers, book stores, and individuals onboard as co-publishers. Now on Twitter of course, you can re-tweet a tweet, right? So at your discretion, you can repost a tweet from one feed onto your feed. The difference in what we did is we set up a third party program that would autofeed each line to, let's say, 30 different co-publishers all at once. Now why did we do that? A lot of people didn't ask us that question and it's an important question to ask.

When you re-tweet, the @electriclit tag would remain on the tweet. Now that does two things. One, it turns Rick Moody's prose into an advertisement for us, which is not our mission at all. And even if that were an acceptable thing to most people, it corrupts the prose. It makes it so that – it would be as if the name of the publisher were attached to the beginning of every sentence in a book.

Q: And you would still be stuck with the 140 character limit, right? So you would have to do some condensation?

A: That's exactly right. So certain tweets that were exactly 140 characters wouldn't work in that way anyway. So we set up a third party program to autofeed it, which meant that every single co-publisher got to take credit for publishing the story on their own. Now this wasn't a problem for probably 95% of the people that saw this and we estimate that number to be around 40,000. At the time, we gained about 10,000 followers on Twitter for doing this. We were starting it around 20,000. With our other co-publishers, we had another 10 to 15,000 plus. Plus there are



people of course that could read it without subscribing to Twitter feeds. Most of them just saw one version of the sentence from one of the 30 co-publishers.

However, people in the book industry and in the book media industry who are closely monitoring many, many different media and publishing organizations all at once, subscribe to multiple feeds that were all involved in the co-publishing process, which means that they got, let's say, three versions – three exact duplicates of the same tweet. One from us, one from Prairie Schooner, one from Ba (sp?) Magazine, one from Vroman's Bookstore, whatever. So from their perspective, they were seeing a kind of Twitter spam happening. Now we had done pre-press with the *Wall Street Journal* and they had done an interview with Rick Moody and were very excited about it, so it was on the radar of major media. Someone at the *LA Times* saw this kind of clogging up of the Twitter feed happening and assumed that it was the experience of the majority of readers, where in reality, it was only the experience of either book reps monitoring multiple bookstores, or someone who writes a blog for the *LA Times* or the *Wall Street Journal*, who are of course monitoring multiple bookstores and multiple literary magazines.

They then generalized that experience up and created a kind of media narrative that we had overlooked this possibility and the whole project, which started off as something great and cool, went to troubled and then failure and then of course to utter failure, which in a way is hysterical to us because it generated this huge snowball effect and all of these blogs started writing about it. The *Wall Street Journal* called us for a response and all of these things, but at the end of the day, the actual readers on Twitter had almost no idea that this was happening. I mean it was a very small percentage. We actually went back and catalogued all of the re-tweets and positive comments and everything that we got. It was about 9:1, positive to negative. And the negatives often had nothing to do with the media narrative about clogging the feed. They would just say, I don't like Rick Moody or whatever they would say.

So you kind of take that number and you project it up. You could safely say that 90% of the people that received the story enjoyed it. We also experienced about 300% increase in traffic to our website, a huge spike in subscriptions and this story was – the existence of this story at the very least was brought to the attention of 40,000 people, which according to Rick, is more readers than he's had in a very, very, very long time, probably since *The Ice Storm* was made into a movie. That's incredible and from our perspective, it's a real boon for literary publishing to show that by using new media, you can really reach more people and does that mean they all read the entire story? Probably not, but what it means is a discussion happened and they were aware that there is more out there. There is literary fiction. They



might enjoy it. Maybe they'll check out the website. Maybe they'll check out someone else's website.

Q: God forbid.

A: Yeah, God forbid they get interested in buying a book. So from our point of view, and given our mission statement, it's a huge success and it was very fun to kind of navigate the media narrative. I think it's unfortunate that it got spun in this kind of negative way, but at the end of the day, Rick was very happy it reached a lot of readers. The readers were very happy and we had a good time. Now will we do it differently next time? Absolutely. I mean we're not unapologetic. One thing we may do – we'll probably still co-publish it because it does help to expand that reach, but we'll probably reach beyond co-publishers who have a similar agenda to us. Maybe we'll get an actor or a musician to co-publish it or a music writer and in that way, we can kind of cross genres and maybe expand the reach and expand the demographic of the audience as well.

Q: Well, you know, we're talking with Scott Lindenbaum, the cofounder of Electric Literature here at the eBook Summit in New York and you hail from Brooklyn, I think your partner said it was the most literary city in the world and I'm thinking of another Brooklyn author who was pretty inventive with the way he published his own work, even reviewing his own work and of course I'm thinking of Walt Whitman, and I sing the body electric, I wonder whether you think Whitman's poetry might be adaptable to the tweeting.

A: I mean that's a good question. You know, one thing about Twitter, and this is interesting, especially regarding something as kind of sacred as *Leaves of Grass* or anything else by Walt Whitman, one thing about Twitter is that it is very difficult to create an uninterrupted stream. When we spoke with Rick about doing his story, it was very, very important to him that each section could be enjoyed in and of itself, outside of the larger narrative and in that way, he described his experience as like writing haiku. There is a turn of phrase, there is a punch, there's something to enjoy in each line beyond the fact that it's a story about two couples who meet through an online dating website and go on a trip to Coney Island, which is the larger story.

Now when you think about something like Whitman and you take into consideration the idea that you want to preserve the integrity of the text, you would certainly want to consider whether or not that integrity would be corrupted by breaking it up and knowing that if a conversation starts on a Twitter feed, that other content may come in and interject itself and therefore would create a kind of mash up effect. Now to purists, this would be absolutely not the right thing to do.



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However, it would be possible and it would certainly be interesting to see what would happen if poetry or even more minimalist prose fiction that could be fit into the 140 character limit, were to be tweeted, just to see. Mash ups are something very interesting to us and it kind of reflects the open source vibe that's happening right now on the internet, where if the content's out there, it's yours to manipulate.

Q: Well, I think the sense I have at least of Whitman as being enormously accepting of all people and all experiences gives me some confidence that he wouldn't mind really very much at all and if I remember my English literature correctly, it was about breathing and the way that the free verse kind of accommodated the human breath and I think Ginsberg likewise was very concerned with breathing and it's a stretch, but maybe 140 characters is about the period of a human breath.

A: Yeah, I think that's a great idea. There's this quality that did happen with the Twitter story that I think reflects on what you're talking about. Because we timed the micro serialization at exact intervals, they were just very short, right? Ten minutes as opposed to maybe like someone like Dickens who, over the course of months, would serialize something. There was a natural rhythm that came about, almost like kind of like you're saying either a breathing or like waves kind of breaking, that couldn't be avoided and it was actually different from the kind of rhythm you would think about when you talk about the rhythm of a narrative, like the way the story unfolds. It's something a little bit different. It's more like the kind of rhythm you experience in a song or in great poetry that's well measured, where the actual words and the accents are coming at expected intervals and then within those intervals, you have then the other rhythm, which is the rhythm of the story and the emotions that are running through it.

So yeah, it's an interesting medium. We're certainly going to do something again, whether it's going to be taking a classic text and mashing it up, whether it's going to be having an author get on there as one of their characters and tweet, whether it's going to be an interactive interview process, or whether it's going to be another piece of Twitter fiction, so to speak.

Q: Well, let us know when your next experiment happens and we'll follow it closely. We've been chatting with Scott Lindenbaum, a cofounder of Electric Literature, who is here at the eBook Summit today in New York with his partner, Andy Hunter. Scott, thank you so much for chatting with me.

A: Yeah, thank you, Chris.

Q: And this is Chris Kenneally for Beyond the Book. Thank you, everyone, for listening and we'll be back to you soon from the eBook Summit.



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