



Beyond the Book[®]



“The Future of Reading” at Book Expo America 2008

KENNEALLY: Well welcome indeed to Book Expo 2008. My name is Chris Kenneally. I'm delighted to host a special panel discussion here. I am the moderator of a program called “Beyond the Book” which is underwritten by the nonprofit Copyright Clearance Center and which can be found at beyondthebook.com. And joining me will be a number of panelists to take a look at a rather slightly ambitious subject and that is the future of reading. And it strikes me that it's not only the future of reading but the future of readers, the future readers themselves, who they are, the future of publishing and finally the future of books.

And I called to mind something I remember reading about the Lumiere brothers who were the inventors of really the first practical film cameras at the end of the 19th century and one of them said that the cinema was an invention without a future. And clearly missed that a little bit considering here we are in Los Angeles with Hollywood just down the street. But I can imagine that if Gutenberg were to invent movable type again today he would probably have the same kind of lament given the competition that the book world has with so much other media. He might think that he would say to himself the book was an invention without a future. And yet what kind of a future is it? Well we can judge a little bit by the past. There's been some numbers released recently that show that 277,000 new book titles were published in 2007, which represents something like a 1% increase over the previous year and still sounds like a lot of books to me.

And interestingly the number of print-on-demand, short-run and nontraditional book publishing, that is growing enormously so individual authors really have great faith in the book themselves. Those numbers have increased from 21,000 in 2006 to 135,000 such titles in 2007. So it's dramatic and I think we're going to expect to see that continue. But for the discussion I want to turn first to Paul Dry. Welcome Paul.

DRY: Welcome Chris. Thanks for having me.

KENNEALLY: Very delighted to have you. And Paul is, if I can name him, a kind of evangelical figure for me at least in publishing. He started Paul Dry books after many years trading stock options on the Philadelphia Stock Exchange and at least as many years if not more reading books. His first books appeared in the year 2000 and the Paul Dry book motto is books to awaken, delight and educate. The list includes adults and young adult fiction, memoir, philosophy, poetry and history. And offers new writing, works in translation, and republication of out-of-print titles. But he has an author on his list who first published a book several years ago – in 2004 I believe – Gabriel Zaid. And in an age of distraction. And Paul those two phrases, age of abundance and age of distraction seem to mean a lot to Gabriel. And tell me what they mean to you.

DRY: Well I think we're all faced with the phenomena of too-muchness. Certainly at the BEA almost everyone walking down the aisle either feels overwhelmed or has learned how to screen out a good bit of what they've walked by. So in abundance – what did you say, 290-some-thousand titles?

KENNEALLY: 277,000 new titles.

DRY: 277,000 and that abundance creates distractions. In addition to all those titles of course the endless time we spend on the Internet either with e-mail or visiting Web sites. What does that mean about reading a book from beginning to end? Well we're distracted from that activity. And I think that's what Gabriel was getting at – all of the ways we can be distracted from finishing – from reading a complete book. It's very easy on the Web to skate around and it's very easy to hop from one book to another without ever giving yourself the chance to finish a book. Now obviously people here are readers but we've all experienced the overload and the enticement to hop from one Web page to another, from one author to another.

KENNEALLY: And the distraction affects all aspects of publishing. We tried to get Gabriel to come and join us today and he had a tremendous reply, I think an e-mail to you. What did he say?

DRY: Well Chris asked me to print it out and there it is down at the booth. Essentially he said he wanted readers, he didn't want viewers. And in fact we don't have permission to print his photograph on the book. He really is serious about wanting people to read his book and not wanting to become an object of a spectacle. Much of the book *The Secret of Fame* is about the possible emptiness of literary fame and as a diversion away from the experience the reader has of the book itself.

KENNEALLY: And that impacts the reader, it seems to me, because we're all susceptible to the attraction of fame and so we're drawn to the famous writer, if you will, and bounced around as the media directs us from one famous or newly-coined famous person to another. And it gets to that point you mentioned of the need to read something completely.

DRY: I know it's passé to say that a book should have a beginning, middle and end. And the French – the film director Godard said fine but not necessarily in that order. I do think things – that books with beginnings, middles and ends in that order, as the author decided what the order was, are really – that's the treasure. That's what we carry around in our imagination. And some of these books we take in so rapidly it's pure joy and others take a lot of work. When I first read Tolstoy I was about 25 and I thought life had passed me by. And I started reading Tolstoy and I looked around, it was absolutely empty, the room. And I was looking for the person I could blame for not telling me to read *War and Peace* sooner. If they'd only told me it was so easy and so much fun, I would have thought what the hell, I'll read it at 16. *War and Peace* is a long read but those of us who have skated into it it's just an endless pleasure like one box of popcorn after another.

KENNEALLY: Well since you're competing – your books and all books are competing with this abundance of media – what do you think the future of books then will be and the future of your books? Have you got a degree of optimism or are you resigned to a niche?

DRY: Well no one can say what the future of the books he or she publishes will be. That seems to be up to the fates. Certainly the future of reading is as assured as the future of eating. We'll continue to eat and we'll continue to read. Of course what we eat and what we read will be up to us and what we find nourishing. So I would argue that the future of reading and of books in particular and of my books will depend on whether readers find them nourishing and pass that on.

KENNEALLY: So if you would, just to continue the metaphor of eating, there's food, of course. There's fast food and slow food and good food and bad food. Does it matter with reading about good reading and bad reading and so forth?

DRY: Well we've all probably been to McDonald's and we know it's fun. And we've all read books that are like McDonald's and they're fun. No one's going to cross the so-called junk books off the list or the good books or the very good books. But when you've come across the good book, the great book, it's – the calories are better, to stay in the metaphor. That doesn't mean they're easy to read. And I'm in a book group and very often we'll end up reading a book that I never would have read. And the harness of the book group pulls me along and I read the book. And I think, as you harness yourself to a book that otherwise you wouldn't have, you have an opportunity to have a great reading experience. Now book clubs are thriving in America, even as we lament the fate of reading. So I'm not discouraged at all about reading. As a small publisher it's I find it very hard to get attention for my books but welcome to the world. I suppose the big publishers find it hard to get attention for their books, too. It's all on scale.

KENNEALLY: And the competition that books have today with other media is one where it brings them up against – the work of the imagination against the work of the image, if you will. And the notion of reading that we all enjoyed as a small

child, perhaps, under the blanket at night with the flashlight, the imagination took control – is there anything lost as imagination diminishes and images grow in power?

DRY: Surely I think so but I would just tout the activity of imagining that a book allows the reader to experience and that it's your image of Dorothea Brooke in *Middlemarch*. It's your image of Long John Silver or your child's image and the child has made that image and you as an adult have made it. And we all know the sense of letdown, really, when you see the movie. Oh that's not how I imagined that figure. Well we're not going to do away with movies but we shouldn't let them co-opt our imagining activity. We should know that it's a little harder to make up Natasha in your mind than to see a beautiful young actress enact Natasha, but it's your Natasha and it never goes away. And curiously your Natasha and your friend's Natasha is something you hold in common as an act that you created individually but that you have in common. The Natasha on the movie screen is neither of yours. It's the one that the movie made. So that's my plea for reading in terms of a possession you have and never is taken away.

KENNEALLY: Well I think the audience can better understand now why I say you have this evangelical theory of publishing. Thank you very much, Paul.

DRY: Thank you, Chris.