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Books, Real and Otherwise

Michael Simonson

Crated, carted, cast aside,
printed works have liquefied
in shocking bouts of bookicide.

The printing press is done, perhaps,
and publishers have (boom!) collapsed
to clicky gadgets, gizmos, apps.

Digital books are all the rage,
touchless paper, turnless page.

Stores are only cyber spaces,
cold, electric, faceless places.

Bookshops closed, bookshelves cleared,
paperbacks have disappeared.

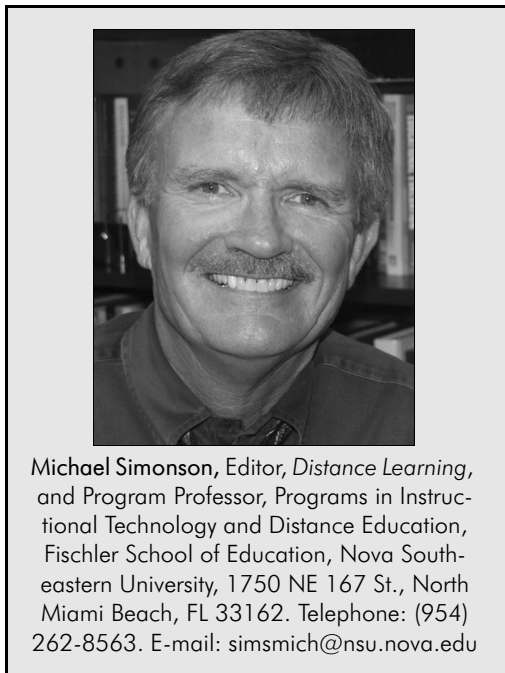
The age of print has culminated,
finished, finis, terminated.

—Susan M. Ebbers

Most agree that a book is a series of printed pages, bound together on one side, and with a cover—something real and physical. Almost everyone knows what a book is, and what books are not. But, maybe it is not that simple. What about virtual books, electronic books, online books? Are they real? Are they books? Or, are they something else—written content? Some textbook publishers would have us think that the electronic book, the virtual book, the online book, are superior to physical books. They are cheaper, more readily accessible, and more modern. But, are they books?

One interesting discussion about books deals with the role the book plays in society. The bestselling book, *The Book Thief*, subtly supports the importance of books. Liesel Meminger is a foster child living in World War II-era Germany. She steals books, including one salvaged from a book burning. Leisel saved and cherished the book. Her book did not burn, and it was a real book.

... continues on page 59



The reader of *The Book Thief* is left with many conflicting images as the story unfolds, but one stands out; somehow the books that Liesel steals and the books she reads save her and give her life meaning. That may not be the message the Markus Zusak, the author, wants the reader to remember, but books and their impact are certainly central to the story of the book thief. Liesel would just be a lost and lonely girl if she did not have books.

What about today? All the rage today is the electronic book, one that exists on a server as a recorded file. Electronic books are a great addition to the options available to the reader, but should electronic books replace real ones?

The electronic book file cannot be read without a software package and without a device such as a tablet reader. And, according to some publishers, the electronic book is not owned by you; rather, it belongs to the publisher—who lets you read it for a price.

Why should distance educators be concerned with the status of the book? What difference does it make if we do not have real books, but only have electronic ones? After all, distance educators are in the business of virtual things. Yet, somehow the

real book seems important, even critical. Distance learners should read books. Most definitely. But does it matter if the book to be read is only online?

Well, the decision to have real or electronic books is being made for us. One large publisher is no longer offering bound copies (books) of its education titles, only electronic ones stored on a company server that must be accessed using a propriety software reader, and readers only get to rent the electronic book for 6 months (or longer for a bit more money). Is this a good idea? Publishers have our best interest in mind, don't they?

A solution: do not adopt a book for your course that does not have the option of a physical book. Certainly, electronic versions of textbooks should be options, but physical books must be available.

And finally, let's stop bookicide, the 21st century equivalent of book burning.

REFERENCE

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