The Codex Funeral

Why books are dead

How the iPad killed them
First I have a confession to make. I suffer from an incurable disease known as bibliomania. I love books. I love them too much. I roughly estimate that I spend at least 200 days out of the year going to bookstores or libraries scouring forgotten tomes to add to my ever increasing collection. My obsessive love of books is arguably a genetic trait which I inherited directly from my father’s literary DNA.

I have had some wonderful adventures with books, ranging from the time that I was locked in Hayward’s public library because I was sitting in an obscure bean chair and was so lost in reading Carl Sagan’s *Dragons of Eden* that I lost all track of time and even, for a spell, of increasingly dimming lights, to receiving an OGSR grant from UCSD in 1987 so as to track down obscure texts in remote and dusty bookstores in Northern India.

At first in my early teen years I couldn’t afford to buy the books I really wanted, so I spent most of my time reading at the bookstore itself. The soon to be sold Bodhi Tree bookstore on Melrose Avenue in West Hollywood was my favorite haunt, especially in its earlier days when the crowds were negligible and a sweet little cat would roam the premises.

My book tastes, however, when I was young were quite narrow, as I was enthralled with anything related to Indian philosophy. I think reading Paramahansa Yogananda’s *Autobiography of a Yogi* at the ripe age of 11 is what influenced my focus. Given my limited funds, it was difficult to satiate my lust for more expensive texts. One in particular caught my eye when I was 18. It was a leather
bound edition of the *Guru Granth Sahib* in four volumes, replete with that incense smell that is the common lot of almost all books published in India. It was prominently featured in the now legendary glass case at Bodhi Tree. I had to have it.

However, it was out of my price range (80 bucks), so I saved my earnings from working as a box boy at the now defunct Market Basket in Studio City until I could take home the object of my insatiable desire. I still have that same edition and it is prominently housed in my own glass case in my bedroom.

Today I have something on the order of 10,000 books, scattered in three major resting places: my office at MSAC, my Huntington Harbour townhouse, and our larger home in La Quinta. My wife, Andrea, jests (though sometimes more seriously) that we bought the latter place just so I could expand my book collection.

I say all of this as a necessary prelude to the main thesis of this magazine: **The book is dead.** We are witnessing the funeral of the codex and the funeral pyre on which it is burning is going up in flames faster than we might at first imagine. I realize that most book lovers will immediately disagree with me, arguing for the uniqueness of the codex where one can easily navigate from front to back and in between in seconds. They will also rightly point out how a book has texture, aroma, and can be so easily portable. All of this I agree with and more. I love the feel of a finely printed book, with its gilded edges and acid free paper. Yet, something happened in the past few years that has changed my mind about the
future of the book and why we will see its present form evolve into something quite different. Indeed, the book is mutating into a completely new species, the likes of which would have been unimaginable in Gutenberg’s day. It is the return of the illuminated manuscript, but this time with lights and sounds and interplay in a fashion that boggles the mind.

I think we can date the day the book died fairly precisely. No, it wasn’t the introduction of the internet in 1969 (though clearly that was the first murder weapon). No, it wasn’t the advent of the Web, as invented by Tim Berners-Lee, on one lonely night in December of 1990. No, it wasn’t even the introduction of Sony’s E-reader or Amazon’s Kindle or Barnes and Noble’s Nook.

**No, the book died on January 27, 2010.**

This was when with much fanfare Steve Jobs announced that Apple was coming out with the iPad. At first the response to the touch tablet, which had been widely over-hyped in the months leading up to it, was somewhat critical because it lacked features that some prognosticators predicted were fundamental (such as a front and back camera, the ability to display flash video, and multi-tasking).

But within weeks after the iPad shipped there was an en masse conversion among a large number of skeptics once they actually got their hands (and this time the word literally does indeed literally apply) on it. I know for myself that within the first hour of getting it on day one I was completely converted.
It should be noted that I was a first adopter to Sony’s E-Reader, Amazon’s Kindle, and Barnes and Noble’s Nook. While I liked the second generation Kindle (the Nook is too boggy for my tastes), I thought the grey screen and uniform print dulled the whole reading experience. Yes, reading it in the sun after surfing was a pleasure, but at home with the lights on I felt I was reading an old Etch a Sketch designed to have letters on it. Though I was duly impressed by the ease with which I could download books and even demonstrated how quickly the Kindle could do so to my varying classes at CSULB and MSAC (30 seconds or less in many cases), I was not wowed by the device and navigated back to books as my first choice for reading material.

All that changed, however, when I got initiated into the iPad. It wasn’t the iBook app (Kindle’s app is far superior in many ways, since it allows one to access your Amazon library over a large array of platforms) or the beautiful way it put PDF documents onto the already built-in virtual bookshelf.

No, it was the fact that I could read almost anything, anywhere, anytime while also accessing the web for news updates, Facebook updates, YouTube videos, Netflix streaming, online gaming, and whatever else strikes my interest or fancy at the time. The iPad is, as other commentators have mentioned, the Swiss Army Knife of Information. And, as such, it has changed even the way I read a book. With a book I am in isolation, blissful solitude to be sure (just me and the writer in a digital stream), but we don’t live in that world anymore. We live in a digital universe where vast
Galaxies of data await our electronic mining simply by using our fingers. I understand too well the emerging argument from some psychologists that our attention span is getting warped by our increasing tendency to multi-task and that we are suffering from digital overload.

That is unquestionably true. I also understand too well the arguments first posed by the late Neil Postman in his severe critique of television and how we are “entertaining ourselves to death.” I also quite appreciate that the iPad like its earlier mentor, iPhone, can do too many things and can (and does) distract us from the text in sight.

All of that is true, plus many more criticisms that one can find scuttling about on the web. But that is precisely the point. Language itself, especially as coded in books, is a virtual simulation of reality. It was never the real thing anyways. I don’t see why one virtual simulation should hold sway and not evolve with our rapidly accelerating technologies. If we hold to these kinds of arguments, then one could (as others did back in the 15th century) justifiably lament the change from handwritten and idiosyncratic texts to mass produced books with their uniform typography.

We are not going back to sitting in caves and drawing animals on jagged walls, as breathtaking as they certainly are in Lascaux, France. And we are not going back to the days of typewriters because we miss using liquid white out when we made misspellings. We are not going back period nor should we.
Today one can access millions of books using one’s iPad or a similar device without adding “weight” to one’s library, since that library is in the “clouds”, always accessible to anyone with an internet connection. We are upending Steven Wright’s ironic joke about owning the world’s largest seashell collection. It was so large, he said, that he had to keep it at all the beaches around the world. Instead of sea shells we have books and we have so many of them now that we cannot store them in one place. Well, today my 10,000 physical books pale to the millions of books available to all of us in an instant. It is as if we went back in time and Cleopatra gave us the entire collection of the Alexandrian Library in Egypt and said, “It is all yours, do what you wish with it.” But instead of accepting the amazing offer, we turn away and say “No thanks.”

Even this analogy comes up woefully short since we have about 50 times more books at our disposal right now at near the speed of light. All we have to do it reach out and “touch it.” It is yours.

All of this became painfully too clear to me when a few months ago I walked into Barnes and Noble at Newport Fashion Island which is one of my usual habits (after visiting the always bountiful Newport Beach Library Bookstore) and realized that I didn’t want to carry a hardback out of the store if I could download the same onto my iPad.

While I still love buying old used books, I have found that I have little interest in adding to my collection with newer tomes from Borders and Barnes and Noble if I can get the same electronically. For instance, I have a hardback copy of the scientific treasure, *Elements*, and I have the same as
an iPad application. The latter is so far superior in almost every way that I have relegated my hardcopy to the hidden shelves I have in my MSAC office.

The book wants to be liberated. Information does indeed want to be free, but not in the monetary sense (I don’t mind paying Apple or Amazon or Google their requisite fees). We live in a multimedia land and our books wish to reflect that as well. So instead of merely left to right text with three or four type fonts (Times Roman, Garamond, and Palatino Linotype being standard), we can have thousands of unique signature types augmented with interactive displays, streaming films, gaming tools, discussion boards, and the entire Oxford English Dictionary at our disposal with just a swipe of our hand. Yes, in the digital multiverse, we can have it all.

Once you open up the proverbial Pandora’s Tablet, there is no turning off the binary light. The distance between the conveyer of information and the receiver is collapsing at an accelerating rate. As Nicholas Negroponte said as far back as 1995, “If it is not on the Net it doesn’t exist.”

Just the other day I received in the mail a large reference book from Brill Publishers in Europe entitled Handbook of Religion and the Authority of Science. It is 924 pages and sells for over 300 dollars new. Even though I contributed close to a 50 page article to this tome, I would never have bought the work myself unless they sent it to me gratis since I was one of the contributing authors. Does it even make sense to charge that kind of
money for a book these days when we can just as easily send it (without any manufacturing costs whatsoever) for free as a PDF file? I think not.

Yet, why should we hold such information hostage to an antiquated system simply because we are bound by tradition? In addition, I can envision this same book to be infinitely more useful and applicable if it were an embedded text surrounded with all sorts of bridges and pathways to data that each of the essays touches upon. In my own article, I think the interested reader would not only benefit from seeing pictures and graphs and charts, but also by watching films that touch upon how science is advertised in certain new religions blossoming out of India. Imagine a book about 9/11 without pictures. Yes, I am not denying its usefulness, but I think the Chinese cliché that a picture is worth a thousand words has more merit to it than Neil Postman and other media critics may wish to admit.

As I often remark to my students, Socrates allegedly wasn’t a great fan of books since he felt that oral conversations allowed for a greater give and take and that books were too permanent and too certain for their own good. Interestingly, I think Socrates was right. The harder and more expensive it was to put words into some material form, the more difficult it became to correct mistakes.

Though I am hesitant to admit it, there is a tyranny to beautifully published books of earlier centuries. They tend to inherit an inflated status that is completely unnecessary and ultimately misleading. But today, with digital publishing (and print on demand) when there is a correction to be
made we can do it with a simple keystroke. And with embedded texts on mobile devices like an iPad, hundreds, if not thousands, of interested readers can add to the book’s import moment to moment with their own musings, creations, and even mash-ups. The result is the opposite of a static book. In fact, the very notion of a book is becoming so transformed in the process that new words are needed to describe precisely what it is.

I am not sure of what neologism to invoke, but I do know that the majority of my reading today is on my iPad. But I have noticed a different kind of reading experience than with a traditional book. With my tablet I feel centered in the middle of a digital wonderland. Almost as if I was in the core of an infinitely turning and adapting wheel that has innumerable photonic spokes bringing in and out electronic messages in a kaleidoscope of colored variations. My imagination or my musings or more importantly my questions are now tethered to a global brain which can, given the ever growing electronic connections, provide me with continual adjustments or clarifications to whatever narrative I am presently engaging.

Perhaps the book is finally morphing into its higher potential, something which was previewed in early manifestations but never fully realized because it took too long to actualize. The book was a precursor to hypertext with its notes, bibliography, and index. But how can one really follow a note if what was referenced resided in a library 30 miles away? Or, how can one justifiably cross-reference a source if such is missing from one’s personal library?
The book of the future, the book that we are now getting glimpses of on Apple’s iPad, is **hypertext fully realized**. Text, all text, all images, all sounds, all films, all games, all interactivity, at the speed of light and in the palm of our hands and in our visual and auditory fields. The book needs to be liberated from its material corpus and fly, fly unencumbered, at the speed of electrons.

Yes, I still go several times a week and buy used books, especially if they are nicely bound or hard to find. Yes, I still love the feel and smell and binding of books. And, yes, I will still surround myself with their multifaceted charms.

But the truth is that books are furniture and what we are discovering is that information in its quest for freedom doesn’t want to be chained down to an elevated podium or locked behind cages in temperature controlled rooms as if readers were nocturnal data thieves. Lest we forget, books are a particular repository of information and tying such wisdom to one form and one form only (acting as if its early genealogy somehow grants it pride and privilege of place) is to neglect the real project at hand which is that we wish to gain knowledge and wisdom.

To echo Nietzsche we have in our digital adventures killed the book. But in so doing we are witnessing the resurrection of knowledge without premade boundaries. We are entering into the portal of Jorge Borge’s famous “Library of Babel” where every book with every permutation is housed in “an indefinite and perhaps infinite number of hexagonal galleries.” But unlike in Borges’ fictional narrative we don’t have to visit this physical labyrinth. Rather, the entire world’s evolving library is sitting on our lap just waiting to be touched. It is a multiverse calling out for our total immersion.
The Book is Dead.