

# Where Words Go To Die

Fatema Johera Ahmed\*  
Melbourne, Australia



*The Book is Dead (Long Live the Book)*

Sherman Young

New South Wales: U of New South

Wales P, 2007. 192 pp.

ISBN 978-0-86840-804-0

---

\* Fatema Johera Ahmed received her MA degree in 2012 in Literature from the Department of English and Humanities, BRAC University. She currently lives in Melbourne where she resourcefully divides her ample time between housewifery, gardening, reading books of worth, attending literary events and falling in love with her new home city.

Perhaps the book was doomed to die – its inevitability preceded by Roland Barthes’s eulogy for authors when he declared the “Death of the Author.” Sherman Young writes about books in an age of near saturation, where everyone writes and no one really reads, where the honorary distinctions between writer and author are obfuscated, and books are confused for objects. Young categorizes the types of books published into functional books that one consults for information, anti-books that are devoid of content and are circulated by their sheer brand worth or impulse buying, and ‘real’ books, the “ideas machine” (30), which preponderates towards ideas, critical and intellectual engagement, empowerment, conversation, and reflexivity. Young’s allegiance is obvious.

An examination of Barnes & Noble’s top-grossing books reveals that ‘frontlist’ titles yield 30 per cent of their revenue which include cook books, mass market books, bestsellers, and self-help books. The flip side is that the vast majority of titles sell fewer than two copies a year. This disappointing state of demand and supply is further consolidated by the reluctance of publishers to consider worthy manuscripts if they cannot be buzz-worthy.

As an experiment, the *Sunday Times* sent out twenty manuscripts of the first chapters of VS Naipaul’s *Free State* in 2005, changing its title and withholding the name of the author. The novel that won Naipaul the 1971 Booker Prize failed to excite their imagination. What sort of doom does this spell for serious authors and book lovers when the rush to mass produce is rivaled by the television, the entertainment industry and the Internet, and the only way to resuscitate the industry is to cater to the popular imagination? In the philistines war cry for instant gratification, one can almost hear a modern day, idiot-box-addicted Mr Gradgrind from *Hard Times* who insists on digestible, piecemeal entertainment with which he can hammer his proselytes into stupefaction. There is nothing a seeker will discover here to retire with and ponder over; there is no thought, no consciousness, no transformation, and no enlightenment.

The fractures between best sellers, consumerism, and ‘real’ books challenge the structural coherence of books as an industry in itself. Also, how does one negotiate with the market place when authors need to eat even as they pursue a calling in their rented ivory towers? How can authors hope to sell and be read if they cannot be relevant? Does the answer lie in striking a balance, a compromise between the two seemingly irreconcilable states? These queries are the refrains of “art for art’s sake,” and Young does not seem to be anywhere near the answer.

Young examines the contemporary book culture from various angles as he laments for an age when “[t]he author was central to the publisher’s existence and success; a success that was not measured in revenue, but in reviews. And in the social and cultural impact of the book” (86). He sees the book reduced to a commodity in the nexus between publishing and the commercial aspirations of a profit-making

enterprise that relies on brand power and unyielding promotion to draw in buyers, not readers. The paradox resides in the book's contribution to dialogue about the nation-building narrative while the publishing process is a business that produces goods with a Product Life Cycle.

The mythic role of the publisher as a nurturer of ideas is replaced by a marketing department that assesses the revenue-making potential of a title; the patron of culture of the bygone age is displaced by the panderer, and content is sacrificed for the cover. This trend perpetuates the decline of the small bookstores in favor of the book superstore which works by pushing the bestsellers. This 'low brow' move caters to mass appeal whilst reading is a niche activity with a niche market, where specific back listed topics will meet the interest of only a particular community of people.

This raises the question as to how much control Leonardo da Vinci had when he was commissioned for his "Mona Lisa," or if he did not yield his paintbrush according to the styles of his time? By the same logic, the change in the way Renaissance art is now perceived as high art is a reflection of the changing attitudes, that well-known tendency to regard the past as the lost, golden age of human civilization when caught in the mire of an ever dystopian present. The concept of self-publishing becomes a viable option coupled with blogging on the Internet where the publisher is done away with altogether.

In this context, the importance of the book's very physicality becomes the cause for its demise because of the fixedness that comes with a printed text. Once acquired, the buyer/reader is unlikely to invest in a new edition. The sub text of its existence allows no further scope for revisions where "the fixedness of the printed book assumes a rigidity to the author's thinking" (107). Yet, one forgets the book existed but electronically from conceptualizations and research, to writing, rewriting and editing, all until the final go-ahead given in the supreme act of recognition in publication.

Young explores alternative avenues to revive the book culture where the tendency is to blur the lines between the object and the concept. This includes print-on-demand technology, collaborated websites like Wikipedia, Amazon dot com, Project Gutenberg, the repackaging of the *World Book Encyclopaedia* from book to CD, the grand plan of making all books digitally available by Google Book Search, and the reconfiguration of books into e-books and e-readers. In the era of the new media, publishers' websites remain reticent about the ways in which books can be made more accessible to readers in their hesitation to look beyond the printed object. Young terms this as cultural inertia; the resistance to new post-modern ways of telling stories is a form of anti-reading, a passivity that insists on handing the author the lead. Yet it is not the author but the profit-maximizing/popular-culture-brewing publishing enterprise that is dictating the terms.

Finally, Young charts a trajectory of evolution towards the Heavenly Library as

similar to the digital camera and iTunes that can only be helped by advances in portability, affordability, and fidelity. The technological hurdles can be overcome if the intellectual one survives its current mercenary slump to exert its influence. The impossibility of stocking all books can then be solved through the existence of an online archive that can be accessed from anywhere. Young relegates the romance of the printed page, the object, to a minor role of illustrated books, gift books, and blockbusters for casual readers. For the continuing dialogue about high culture and low, about the printed book, blogs, and e-books, as an intertextual case in point for the arguments explored in *The Book is Dead (Long Live the Book)*, and for future additions, modifications, and recantations Young may have to add to the discourse, he invites us to his [www.thebookisdead.com](http://www.thebookisdead.com).

