

# The Digital Landscape

BY DAMON BROWN

The digital publishing revolution has and will have many casualties, but the most important death will be to the self-publishing stigma. Vanity presses conjure up images of moldy books stacked in a garage and self-aggrandizing autobiographies broken into Ben Franklin–inspired volumes. Today, e-book publishing provides the ultimate low-production cost, high-distribution channel for authors, and not only for amateurs and wannabes, but for professional writers disillusioned by the traditional publishing model.

I recently spoke to D. Patrick Miller, who founded Fearless Books in 1997 after he realized he could handle his book better than could his new editor at a major New York publishing house that shall remain nameless. He paid back the advance, published the book himself and *Understanding a Course in Miracles* surpassed the original advance and was acquired by Random House a decade later. He is now immersed in digital publishing, putting his books directly onto e-book platforms.

“[The biggest challenge] used to be distribution, but with the rise of e-books that challenge is fading,” Miller says. “Through the platforms provided by Smashwords, Content Reserve and their retail outlets, I now have vast digital distribution, far surpassing what would have ever been possible with print.”

Digital books are not new, nor are the tablets we read them on, but the success of the Apple iPad and, more importantly, its book-dedicated competition, such as the Nook and Sony E-reader, have permanently transformed how readers read. Amazon is tightlipped on the actual number of Kindles sold, but the company announced that it moved more units of Kindles than of any other product, including *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, the last book in the record-breaking series. Bloomberg estimates that more than 8 million Kindles were sold in 2010, equal to the number of iPads Apple says it has moved. The second-place Barnes & Noble Nook device is also thriving, with the company selling more Nook e-books than physical books through its website.

The elephant in the room is that consumers are not buying a physical book for the home and a digital version for the road, but opting to cop the more affordable and portable e-book instead of the traditional book. Let’s take a closer look at the recent successes: Amazon’s digital book device outsold one of the bestselling physical books of the previous decade, while Barnes & Noble’s digital book sales may be less reflective of the Nook’s success and more indicative of B&N’s sluggish physical book sales. We may not have enough numbers to make a definitive judgment, but the bookstores can’t complain. The companies are reluctant to share exact sales figures on digital sales, perhaps because they fear the numbers will seem relatively low compared to actual physical books being moved—and these low numbers seem more impressive when we see percentages and abstract comparisons instead of apples-to-apples statistics. If there is a digital-over-physical mentality prevalent today, Amazon and Barnes & Noble are promoting it themselves by providing their sales numbers as such.



The rough road for 2011 isn’t for the author, who can easily publish his or her work; the consumer, who now has easier access to books; or for the bookseller, who can still adapt to the digital marketplace; but for the traditional publisher. Authors come to publishers for three reasons: editing, publicity and/or distribution. Editing could be done independently, but getting potential readers aware of the book and putting it in their hands are the most difficult tasks. The new digital world has resolved the two latter issues by creating social media and e-book platforms, respectively. This year, it will be Manhattan publishers, and not independents, who will be trying to find out their next act.

*Media critic Damon Brown is author of several books, including The Complete Idiot’s Guide to Memes and the bestselling Damon Brown’s Simple Guide to the iPad, which he self-published. Follow him online at [www.twitter.com/browndamon](http://www.twitter.com/browndamon).*