

Book Browsing

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Editorial
BOOK BROWSING

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It is not difficult to identify serious readers. In their homes, books will enjoy pride of place. They may plan their travels around visiting used bookstores or making a pilgrimage to a famous writer's residence. And they tend to be more introspective than their neighbors, for readers rightly see themselves as participating in a process of intellectual discovery. What passes on television networks as well-crafted "sound bites," we readers are inclined to think of as sentence fragments.

Among book publishers and consumers there continues to be much distress about the industry's fate. Most readers could name a favorite local bookstore that went under because of declining sales and rising costs. The declining number of independent booksellers is pinned on easy suspects: megastores, Internet sales, overpricing by publishers, etc. Although competition for retail book sales has certainly increased in recent years, other aspects of book culture seem to be thriving.

When browsing in used bookstores, I often make a point of asking the proprietors how the Internet has affected their sales. Almost without exception, I am told in reply that online book databases have opened entirely new markets. One owner in a small Georgia town confessed that online sales around the world now cover his store's rent. In short, everyone benefits—used bookstore owners, the local communities they serve, and the fellowship of readers who have ready access to out-of-print books.

Even the concept of books going out-of-print soon may face extinction. As more publishers digitize their works, print-on-demand technology will make it affordable to produce small print runs in perpetuity. Books could be available in print forever.

Readers benefit also from the opportunity to offer their own reviews of books on the Amazon.com Website. "Every man a book reviewer!" it seems.

And in bookstores, where employee "hand-selling" can introduce a deserving but unpublicized work to the public, I notice the proliferation of mini-reviews posted by staff and customers who wish to recommend books to their neighbors. Or, as the case might be, to caution against a book that is factually unreliable or poorly written. Recently at *Civil War Book Review (CWBR)*, I corresponded with a reader who took issue with captioning errors in a book that we had covered in a previous issue. Our reviewer had noted some reservations about the book's format, while praising other aspects, so I invited her to join in what became a three-way discussion over email. Such are the technological possibilities when put at the disposal of conscientious readers and reviewers.

Yet fresh ideas remain the most essential element in promoting serious reading. Two years ago, *CWBR* set out to bring serious readers together with the best new and newly reprinted work on the Civil War era. Today, our journal is sold in over 1,000 bookstores, large and small, from coast-to-coast. We offer mail subscriptions, as well, for those who wish to conveniently receive every issue. Our website features the full text of our printed editions, plus search capability, online book purchasing, and the ability for users to email reviews to friends.

As we begin a new publishing cycle, you may notice that this issue carries the designation "Winter 2001," even though it is the fourth issue we published during 2000. To offer greater shelf life to issues, *CWBR* installments will henceforth carry the forthcoming season's name. While we may be skipping the fall season, I assure you that we'll never skimp on the quality of reviews you read in our pages.