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ON NATURE

Eye of Newt

C. Kevin Smith

My sister saw a newt the first time she looked at her son. Shane was not yet born, but the image produced by the sonogram in the doctor's office offered Carole a glimpse of her fetal child in the form of a creature she has cherished since childhood: the slender form of a newt. A little squiggle of life, appearing on the sonogram screen as shadow against shadow, elemental and uncomplicated and pulsing with possibility.

There is something at once embryonic and ancestral about the newt, as if its form could suggest both the not yet born and the ancient. More than any other amphibian, today's newts closely resemble the earliest historic amphibians preserved in the fossil record. So even as a fossil, this long-enduring shape—relatively unchanged for millions of years—seems, in its simplicity, like the shape of something young and fresh and new. Small size (rarely longer than six inches), elongated body, two pairs of legs of roughly the same size, four fingers, four or five toes.

What a wonder the human mind is! A single thought in a single moment can wrap itself around an image, a memory, a feeling, a tiny newt-design, and in the private corners of the mind an individual story—the questions, dreams, fears and desires of a young woman about to be a mother—can silently echo across the span of time to the distant and still evolving story of life on Earth.

And what about the newt mind? What pictures of its life does it see?

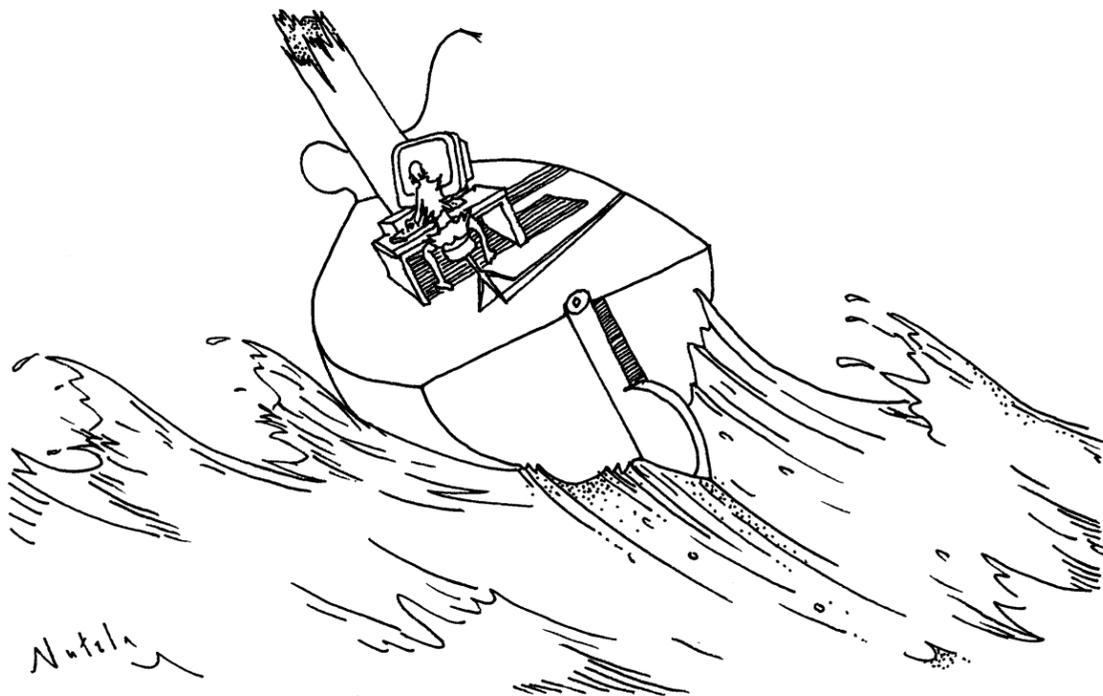
Before attempting to imagine the life of a newt from the inside out, so to speak, let us first attend to its surface. For the skin of a newt is one of its most remarkable features, accounting for many of its behavioral aspects.

Of course, this is true of any amphibian, a word derived from the Greek word *amphibios*, meaning to live a double life or to live on two sides. Newts live on the two sides of the Earth's surface, water and land. During their larval stage, they breathe through gills they will shed upon reaching maturity. Though adult newts do possess lungs, they also breathe by means of cutaneous respiration, a process involving specialized glands that produce a shiny mucus underneath the outermost skin layer, keeping the newt's body in a state of constant and protective moisture. This slipperiness also allows newts to escape from predators.

Newts also repel predators with the amazingly potent toxic secretions present in their skin. The Rough-skinned newt (*Taricha granulosa*), California's most aquatic newt, possesses in its skin a neurotoxin (tetrodotoxin) that is among the most toxic substances known to science. One Rough-skinned newt can carry sufficient tetrodotoxin to kill 25,000 mice. Yet this same newt can be eaten by a garter snake. Indeed, some of the newt's predators—and there are many—have evolved resistance to the toxins in newt skin.

(Speaking of snakes, it is an artifact of the history of science that newt research should fall under the category of herpetology, a field of inquiry comprising amphibians and reptiles. Herpetology derives from the Greek word *herpo*, meaning to creep or to crawl. That creatures as widely different as snakes and frogs should find themselves lumped together

ILLUSTRATIONS PAGE 1, 2, 7, 10 BY FUTZIE NUTZLE



Staying Afloat

The poor devil author in the 21st century

Daniel Barth

"I am thinking of that age when work will be forgotten and books assume their true place in life."

—HENRY MILLER

Here on the West Coast of the United States and all over the country, the planet and the World Wide Web, many of us continue to pursue an old dream: artistic and financial success as a writer. In the 19th century, Washington Irving's poor devil author, a young man from a rural English village, made his way to London to seek publication of his epic poem, "The Pleasures of Melancholy." In the 20th century, in this country, young writers from the provinces most often made their way to New York, or at least sent their manuscripts to one of the reputable New York publishers, where competent editors worked conscientiously to get the best books into print and distributed widely. That's the model of literary success most of us grew up with.

According to Jason Epstein, whose 60-plus years of experience in publishing are skillfully distilled in *The Book Business*, that model held up pretty well until the late 1960s, when chain stores in suburban malls began to take over the market once dominated by independent urban booksellers. Those chains—Waldenbooks and B. Dalton—eventually gave way to the superstores, Borders and Barnes & Noble.

In response to this "demographic earthquake" publishers began to change their way of doing business. Where a solid backlist had once been the mainstay of any good publisher, the market began to demand bestsellers. The old writer-friendly New York publishing houses, where Thomas Wolfe could rhapsodize till dawn or Faulkner nurse a hangover, were by 1980 almost all owned by large US corporations. Those corporations in turn began to sell off these not-profitable-enough publishing enterprises, to the point where all the once renowned houses—Knopf, Random House, Viking, et al.—are now fully owned subsidiaries of five foreign-based conglomerates.

Undoubtedly there are still many good and even excellent books that come out of this hit-driven industry. But for the young man or woman from the provinces, chances of success with one of the corporate publishers are slim. What, then, is a poor devil author to do?

By now we've all heard of print on demand. Companies like iUniverse, Blurb and Xlibris make it possible for anyone with several hundred dollars to get a book into print. More and more writers are going this route. There are also of course the many excellent university presses and small publishers, the micro-breweries of the publishing world. And having an agented book proposal or manuscript accepted by a mainstream publisher remains possible, if difficult to achieve.

I decided to talk with a few writers here in Northern California and find out what strategies they have employed to publish and promote their most recent books.

"Hit-driven economics is a creation of an age without enough room to carry everything for everybody. This is the world of scarcity. Now, with online distribution and retail, we are entering a world of abundance. There are niches by the thousands, genre within genre within genre."

Bruce Patterson's book *Walking Tractor and Other Tales of Old Anderson Valley* came out in January 2006, self-published by his 4 Mules Productions. It's an unusual-looking book, wire-bound, with a soft cover that has a color photo inset. I heard Bruce read at Mulligan Books in Ukiah and was interested by something he said about self publishing because he didn't want to be "a literary sharecropper." I asked him what he meant by that.

"That's how I came out of the gate. After 32 years of taking my living straight from the dirt of Anderson Valley, I'm out of a job. The entire valley has changed in that time. The homesteader economy is basically gone. And then, I wanted to write, I wanted to try my hand at writing. So rather than send out manuscripts as an unknown, I did it myself, to put my foot in the water to see if I had anything there. And what I wrote about was a picture of time, 1975 call it, circa 1975, of Anderson Valley, the homesteader economy, the loggers, my jobs, the stuff I did. What I wanted to do was create something unique, a memoir as short story, giving different views of what it's like to be a woodcutter, a sub-choker setter, a timber faller, a sheep skinner, whatever."

Patterson's promotion strategy had this same local flavor. He printed 900 copies, priced at \$19.95 each, and began by offering a deal to local stores.

"I just started with consignments in local markets, all the local video stores, a couple of the tasting rooms where I had friends. And my pitch to them was: I don't want any money. Here's six copies. Keep two copies free. I'd like you to read them, or give them away, or sell them. And once you sell out the other four you can pay me for them and I'll return with more books. I didn't even pitch a bookstore for three months."

With his book specifically for and about the local community, this strategy proved successful. Patterson did eventually place the book in Northern California bookstores, and promoted it via radio interviews, readings, writers conferences

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ASSOCIATED PRESS

ence. “I talked about *The Golden Notebook* recently and I had to explain everything,” she says. “I had to give a history lesson.” She can, of course, be whimsical and just plain funny. She’s never met Rupert Murdoch, who owns HarperCollins, her longtime publisher, but she calls him, wryly, “my boss,” and toward her beloved cats she’s always affectionate. Before we leave for the bookshop to publicize Kavan’s work, Doris opens a can of cat food and serves them dinner to let them know she hasn’t forgotten them. In the cab, she engages in conversation with the Somali-born driver on the subject of terrorism, and, when he asks why nations still make war, she says, “Because it’s profitable.” She can’t quite shed the radical political perspective that once motivated her and her work. During the week that I visited Doris, car bombs failed to explode in London, but Doris wasn’t on edge about terrorism or terrorists. Like most Londoners, she lived through the Irish Republican Army (IRA) bombings for decades, and like most Londoners she adopts a stiff upper lip, and a “we carry on” attitude. The weather is another story. It has rained for weeks and weeks and that depresses her. So does the mass media’s stereotyping of Arabs and Muslims, and she complains that most Americans have negative images of Islam, and the Islamic world.

Doris says that she has found it difficult to promote *The Cleft*, her most recent novel, published in England in the winter of 2007, and in the States in the summer. It’s on sale at the London Review Bookshop, along with Kavan’s work, and she’s only too happy to autograph it for fans. Told by a crusty Roman senator who has lost two sons in the wars with the barbarians, *The Cleft* offers Lessing’s version of Genesis, Exodus, and the origins of the inexorable war between the sexes, a theme she has explored as profoundly and as originally as any writer of our time, especially in masterful short stories. Ursula Le Guin missed the point of *The Cleft* in *The New Statesman*—the British weekly that once heralded each new Lessing novel—as an anti-female, anti-feminist tract. In fact, Lessing is far more scathing about men than women. The grunting, groping cavemen in the novel care largely for adventure and games and not for the survival and wellbeing of the human species.

Doris has been stung by the negative reviews in England. Still, she hasn’t taken them to heart. “I have moved on,” she says. “I have started to write a new novel about my parents, and who they might have been if World War I had not taken place. I have made my father into an English farmer, which is what he always wanted to be.” Writing happy endings has usually eluded Lessing, and whether she can write one this time remains to be seen. I have my doubts.

“This book is going to be my last,” Doris says. “I just don’t have the energy anymore, and certainly not the kind of energy that enabled me to write *The Golden Notebook* in just a year. I snatch moments here and there, but no extended periods of time.” Of all her novels, *The Golden Notebook* is clearly the one she likes the best and she doesn’t mind saying, vigorously, “It’s extraordinary isn’t it!” Indeed, it is, and I don’t mind telling her so.

I remind Doris that Kurt Vonnegut insisted repeatedly in the 1980s and 1990s that each book he wrote would be his last book, only to go on writing another book, and then another after that. She has no direct retort,

only a heartfelt comment. “Vonnegut was a wonderful writer, and with his death I feel that I have lost a dear brother,” she says.

Why she agreed to attend the Doris Lessing conference, and then changed her mind, isn’t clear, though I received an unambiguous postcard that made me smile. “I won’t be attending the DL conference after all,” she wrote. Now, at her flat, she explains, “I’m not going because they’ll be talking rubbish about the Sufis. You know, to be a Sufi all you have to do is say, ‘I’m a Sufi’ and ‘I’m enlightened,’ but they make a big mystery out of it.” Moreover, on the whole, Lessing is not a polished performer in public, and, as she explains to me, “I can’t take on a persona when I am out in the world.” Indeed, for the most part, she can’t and hasn’t. The Lessing one sees in public isn’t an actor putting on a show; she’s the real thing: herself. She can be feisty on stage, and in front of an audience, and sometimes she’s on a short fuse if she thinks a question is idiotic. Recently, a young woman asked her to explain the meaning of life, and when she declined, the young woman turned belligerent.

For the most part, the daughters of my sixties friends have not heard of Lessing, or read *The Golden Notebook*, which once stirred their mothers to join consciousness-raising groups, and become liberated women. Such are the vagaries of fame and influence. It seems certain, especially now that she has won the Nobel Prize, that her work will not fade away. Moreover, college teachers, like the academics who attended this year’s Doris Lessing conference, assign it to undergraduates, not only in England and in the United States, but in China, Tunisia, India, Australia, Canada, South Africa, Spain—and wherever English is read and spoken, which is everywhere in the world today. The Nobel Prize will surely encourage a new generation of readers to discover her work. Moreover, one hopes that readers the world over will discover her work outside the confines of the classroom and the canon, which can make the act of reading into a passionless exercise in which the student is urged to ferret out subtexts. Perhaps in the future—perhaps even in another galaxy, I’d like to think—students will read Lessing’s work in the ways that she has urged them to read *all* literature.

“There is only one way to read, which is to browse in libraries and bookstores, picking up books that attract you, reading only those, dropping them when they bore you, skipping the parts that drag,” she wrote in the 1971 introduction to a reprint of *The Golden Notebook*. And, as though thinking perhaps of Anna Kavan, and perhaps of the ideas she has entertained and that have never found tangible expression in plot and character, she adds, “Remember that for all the books we have in print [there] are as many that that never reached print, have never been written down.”

Jonah Raskin teaches at Sonoma State University. His anthology The Radical Jack London: Writings on War and Revolution will be published in May 2008. Many books by Doris Lessing can be found through Coast Community Library.

AUTHOR from page 1

and a Web page (www.4mules.com). But the Anderson Valley stores were his mainstay. The book sold very well and attracted the attention of Berkeley publisher Heyday Books. In December 2006 Patterson signed a contract with Heyday. They will publish a new edition of *Walking Tractor* in June 2008.

“The reason why I signed with Heyday,” Patterson explains, “the reason why I sold out, so to speak, was that it gives me time to write. As far as promotion and keeping the ball rolling, word of mouth will carry you only so far, so I had to follow those ripples out. Now they take care of that. So I can just focus on writing. What I’m doing now is writing a second book.”

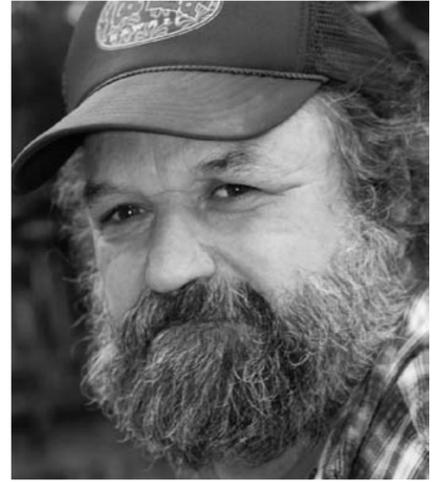
Voilà! A publishing success story to make us all envious. I asked Patterson how he had come out financially.

“I would have made a lot more money cutting firewood. But I gave away a lot of copies to the old timers I wrote about. Or old friends, if I ran into them I would give them copies. When an old barrel-chested rodeo cowboy came up to me about three months ago and shook my hand and asked me if I’d sign his book, right there I knew I was an artistic success. Commercial success is something else. They may not be everybody’s cup of tea, but my books will sell in this part of Mendocino County for a long time.”

The lesson from Patterson’s success seems pretty clear. It is important for writers and books to find their appropriate niches. In *So Many Books: Reading and Publishing in an Age of Abundance*, Gabriel Zaid makes this point repeatedly: “With few exceptions, the world of the book has no connection to massive and undifferentiated markets; it relies instead on segmented clienteles, specialized niches, and members of different clubs of enthusiasts.” Even though more and more books continue to be published each year, most sell only a few thousand copies. Rather than bewail



Janet Grace Riehl



Bruce Patterson

this state of affairs, Zaid suggests that we embrace it: “What is desirable is not that all books should have a million readers, but that they should attain their natural readership.” His model for literary culture is an unlimited number of diverse and ongoing conversations. He sees it as the proper goal of publishers, booksellers and librarians to help facilitate these conversations by helping a book find its readers.

This seems an appropriate goal for the writer as well, especially in the case of self-publishing or print on demand, in which the writer decides to forego these intermediaries and appeal directly to readers. Both Epstein and Zaid see this as an increasingly viable strategy, harking back to the subscription sales of Dickens and looking forward to what Epstein calls “the technological future . . . the electronic literary marketplace just over today’s horizon.” He believes that “the Internet, by connecting readers and writers one on one, offers the possibility of almost limitless choice and foreshadows a literary culture thrilling in its potential diversity.”

One wonders if this limitless choice, without competent editorial and critical intervention, will lead to chaos instead of healthy diversity. Epstein dismisses that possibility rather convincingly: “The critical faculty that selects meaning from chaos is part of our instinctual equipment, and so is the gift for creating and recreating civilizations and their rules without external guidance. Human beings have a genius for finding their way, for making orderly markets, distinguishing quality, and assigning value. This faculty can be taken for granted. There is no reason to fear that the awesome diversity of the World Wide Web will overwhelm it.”

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AUTHOR from page 9

Lake County writer Janet Grace Riehl decided to publish her book, *Sightlines: A Poet's Diary*, through print-on-demand publisher iUniverse.

"One reason I went with iUniverse," she says, "was because of the timing. Perhaps if I had sat with the book longer and shopped the book I could have found another publisher, but this way I had creative control and I could get it out very quickly. The timing of it was very important to me."

This timing had to do with the nature of the book. As she explains in the Preface, Riehl wrote the book after the death of her sister in a car crash. After returning to Southern Illinois to be with her family, she began writing the poems and short pieces that comprise the book. Once it was completed, it was important to her to get it into the hands of friends and family members. She started work on the book in January 2005 and it was in print by February 2006, at a cost of just under \$1000.

Feedback was encouraging and Riehl began to promote the book on a Web site and at readings. Not content to simply read from the book, she wrote connecting material and turned each reading into a special event, often playing fiddle and singing as part of her presentation. I heard her in Ukiah at a Writers Read event at Colored Horse Studio. Her talk that night was titled "Story Poems for the Families of the World." I asked her about her approach.

"Well, I wanted to do talks as opposed to readings because I wanted to set a context for the work. And I really love doing it that way. Usually in my talks there is a musical element. I did a service for the Unitarian Universalists in Lake County. For that one I designed the entire service. I selected the music. That talk was called "Memento Mori: Life and Death Moment by Moment." Music was interspersed with my poems. And I really liked that, because especially that talk, and some of the others, the subject matter was very demanding. And then I'm inviting people to consider the topic in a more general sense, to really consider death as a topic. I didn't want it to just be a dead sister book. I'm a student of Tibetan Buddhism, and a core belief there is that if we look firmly on death our life takes on renewed meaning. That was a message that I wanted to bring to people, without being churchy about it. So the new writing kept it fresh for me and for my audiences as well. And so it became exciting because what I was in fact doing was—okay, first you have to prime yourself to write the book, then you have to prime yourself to promote the book, but there's another piece that really isn't spoken about, and that is, after you write the book you have to understand what the devil you wrote. And that's what these talks allowed me to do."

When asked how she has come out financially, Riehl says, "I think I've broken even. Really, my family training, from my father, is just offer it, as a sort of gift. This particular book was for that. It was for myself, for the family, and certainly for others in that type of situation."

Riehl has recently moved to St. Louis to be closer to her 92-year-old father. She is at work on a new book about her experiences living in Africa for five years in the 1970s. The Web site she created to promote *Sightlines* has since morphed into a blog called Riehlife: Village Wisdom for the 21st Century (www.riehlife.com). She posts something new on the blog almost every day.

Hal Zina Bennett also lives and writes in Lake County. He is one of the few people I know who actually makes his living through his literary endeavors: writing, conducting seminars and workshops, consulting with publishers and agents, and coaching writers. His most recent books are *The Lens of Perception* (Celestial Arts, 2007) and *Reads: An Anthology of Writings by The Lakeside Writers Guild* (iUniverse, 2006), which he contributed to and edited. He is also the author of *Write from the Heart* (New World Library, 2001), which explores the writing process from the creative spark through publication and promotion.

The *Reads* anthology was a collaboration of the eight-member Lakeside Writers Guild, which Bennett mentors. "The goal," he says, "was to give people the experience of publishing, taking them through the whole process to an actual book, to have authors who've never published before experience what it is like to get into print and have their work read by hundreds of people, and to share some excellent writing with the community. Really, it was a community-oriented project."

They published with iUniverse at a cost of around \$100 each, and promoted the book at readings in Lake, Mendocino and Marin counties. "We did about eight readings," says Bennett, "and also made the book available at local bookstores and online. We calculated that each author only had to sell about 12 copies retail to get his or her money back. Other money from sales went into a pool we share."

Bennett's work is a good example of how a writer can succeed by working within mainstream publishing while not forsaking small presses, self-publishing and local involvement. His career was kick-started in 1970, when a book he co-authored, *The Well Body Book*, became a bestseller. On the strength of that he made contacts and received offers to write more. *The Lens of Perception*, a memoir about personal growth and discovery, was first published 20 years ago. Based on interest created by the 2004 movie *What the Bleep Do We Know?*, Celestial Arts contacted Bennett about creating a new edition. He agreed and did a good deal of rewriting. The book was released in August 2007 and has been selling well.

"This book has always been with Celestial Arts/Ten Speed Press," says Bennett. "They are the largest independent book publisher on the West Coast, with about 5000 titles. I originally received a small advance against royalties



on this book—\$3500 as I recall. The book is distributed throughout the US and has been published in three languages. It has been through three editions, that is, rewrites with additional material each time, plus new cover design, etc. There are probably something like 20,000 copies in print. I'm not positive on the numbers. It has received excellent reviews from some of the top reviewers at *Publishers Weekly* and *School Library Journal*, with endorsements from at least a dozen other authors, including three bestselling authors. I've done readings in probably 20 or 30 bookstores in three states, radio interviews, and some workshops. I also sell the book through my Web site [www.halzinabennett.com]. It's considered a very successful book in terms of the number sold. The average book published in the US sells fewer than 5000 copies."

I asked Bennett about the changes he has experienced during his 40 years in the publishing business.

"The sixties was an exciting time, with the West Coast developing a publishing industry separate from East Coast publishing. Small publishers were sprouting up everywhere. A few, like New World Library, Ten Speed Press, Celestial Arts, and J. P. Tarcher, are quite large and quite successful publishers today. The West Coast also developed independent book distribution, with companies like Bookpeople becoming incredibly successful, handling mostly authors from California and Nevada. It was a creatively fertile time for radical politics, radical poetry, radical theater, and radical living. Today, publishing is once again settled into the East Coast, though all the big publishers back there are the property of huge corporations—all owned by companies from other countries, by the way. It's pretty conservative, with most editorial departments highly influenced by what will sell in the chain stores. A sad and dangerous state of affairs, really, what I call censorship at the cash register. And the corporate policy of the big chains—Borders and Barnes & Noble, predominately—is to run off the independent booksellers. Very few publishers are taking risks anymore. And that's even true for the larger independent publishers who're still doing business out here."

When asked if he is encouraged or discouraged by what he sees happening now, Bennett responded: "I'm discouraged by what's happening to independent bookstores and smaller publishers, and discouraged by the increasingly conservative trends of East Coast publishing. But I'm encouraged in a way by new printing technologies that make it possible to produce a high-quality book for a small investment. This is inspiring more and more writers to publish their own books. It's a trend that's happening in publishing, in music, and in independent filmmaking. We're barely seeing the beginning of this movement, with more and more people learning how to use the Internet for marketing their wares—music, film, and publishing. Over the next decade we're going to see a whole new paradigm in the publishing world—and then we'll all find out what's really bubbling away below the surface and behind the scenes."

In relation to this new paradigm, Bennett pointed me to "The Long Tail," an article by *Wired* magazine editor Chris Anderson, which has since been expanded into a book, *The Long Tail: Why the Future of Business Is Selling Less of More*. That subtitle basically explains the concept. "Most of us want more than just hits," writes Anderson. "Everyone's taste departs from the mainstream somewhere, and the more we explore alternatives the more we are drawn to them."

He credits online retailers like Amazon.com and Netflix with accelerating this phenomenon through their combination of unlimited shelf space, customer reviews, and "customers who bought X also bought Y" marketing. "Hit-driven economics is a creation of an age without enough room to carry everything for everybody. This is the world of scarcity. Now, with online distribution and retail, we are entering a world of abundance. There are niches by the thousands, genre within genre within genre." Anderson believes that the potential book market may be at least twice as big as it currently appears to be, but that most of this market lies outside the scope of the traditional bookseller, or "physical retailer."

"First you have to write the book, then you have to promote the book, but there's another piece that really isn't spoken about, and that is, after you write the book you have to understand what the devil you wrote."

As Bennett and Anderson suggest, the future looks quite a bit rosier for writers than it does for our friends and allies at small presses and independent bookstores. The trend seems to be toward eliminating middlemen. Like writers, these businesses are employing diverse strategies to adapt and survive—getting smaller or larger, diversifying, specializing, providing writers and readers the personal attention and conviviality the Internet lacks. At this point most bookstores still reflect the dominance of the corporate publishers, but that may change, it may have to change, if they wish to stay viable in the changing marketplace. Though e-book readers and text downloads exist, the predicted end of the book is not on the horizon. Says Zaid: "The content may be identical, but the visual, tactile, and even olfactory experience can make a lot of difference to the reader." By taking advantage of this difference, independent publishers and booksellers should be able to continue find ways to survive and thrive.

In the world of the long tail, of increasingly diverse and complex (read "healthy") literary culture, artistic success and personal fulfillment for writers is more than ever possible. Financial success remains a tougher nut to crack. "Literature, like all religions," writes Epstein, "is also a business, though not a very good business." Many writers support their habit by teaching. (The trick is not to let academic duties become so onerous and time consuming that they leave too little time and energy for writing.) Bruce Patterson says he will probably have to make some money cutting firewood this winter. Janet Grace Riehl has been living on savings and the kindness of friends and family. Hal Zina Bennett is a financially successful writer, but he does not put all his eggs in one basket, and he works long hours: writing, consulting, ghosting, coaching and mentoring.

Irving's poor devil author never did find a publisher for his epic poem. He stayed in London, though, and made a career writing articles, reviews and travel sketches, mostly anonymously. It was not the lofty height to which he had aspired, but he found his niche. "Take my word for it," he concluded, "the only happy author in this world is he who is below the care of reputation."

I've been thinking about Andy Warhol's predicted future. Maybe what he really meant was that no one will be famous for more than 15 minutes. In the 21st century, the literary lion may be a vanishing species, but the ongoing buzz from a multitude of diverse and fascinating conversations is likely to drown out his dying roar.

Daniel Barth, an RCR contributing editor, lives in Ukiah and publishes variously.

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